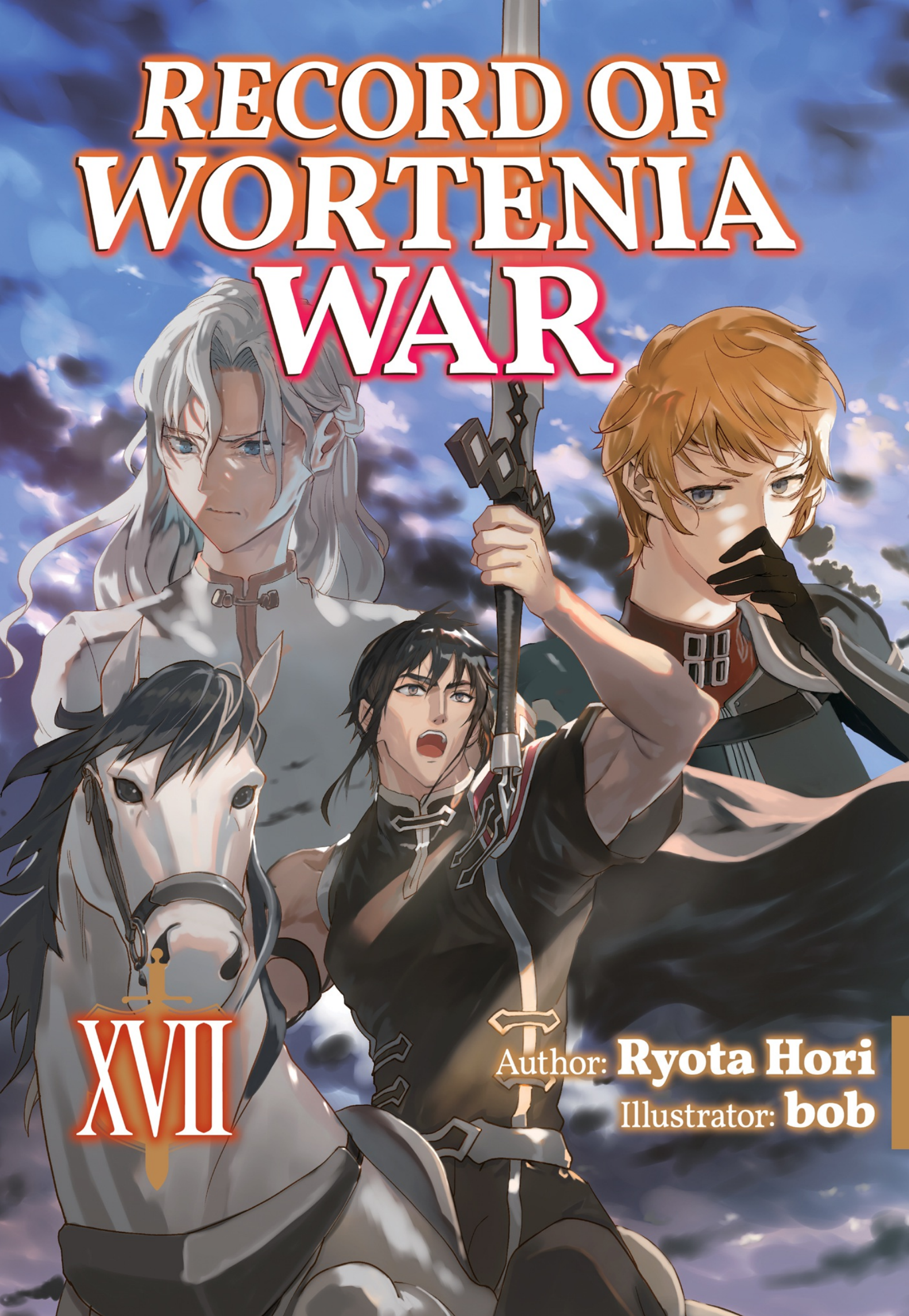


RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

The background of the cover is a dramatic sky with blue and purple clouds. In the upper left, a character with long white hair and blue eyes looks forward. In the center, a character with black hair and blue eyes is shouting, holding a sword. To the right, a character with short brown hair and blue eyes is shown in profile, holding a sword. In the bottom left, the head of a white horse is visible.

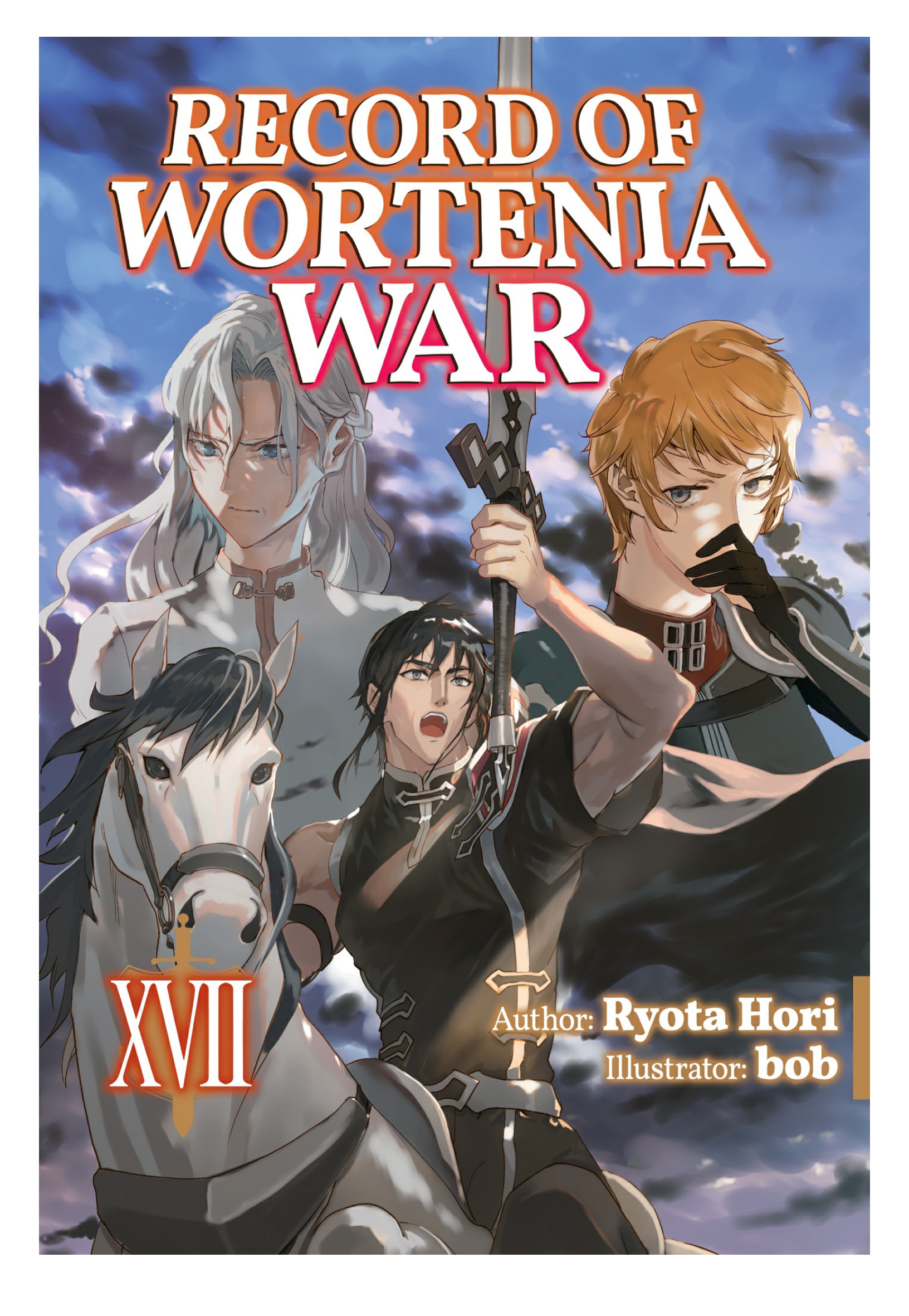
XVII

Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**



RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

The background of the cover is a dramatic sky with blue and purple clouds. In the upper left, a character with long white hair and blue eyes looks forward with a serious expression. In the center, a character with black hair and blue eyes is shouting, wearing a black tunic with silver accents. To the right, a character with short brown hair and blue eyes holds a sword aloft with their right hand and has their left hand near their mouth. In the lower left, the head of a white horse is visible, wearing a bridle. The title 'RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR' is at the top in large, stylized white letters with orange and red outlines. The volume number 'XVII' is in the bottom left, and the author and illustrator names are in the bottom right.

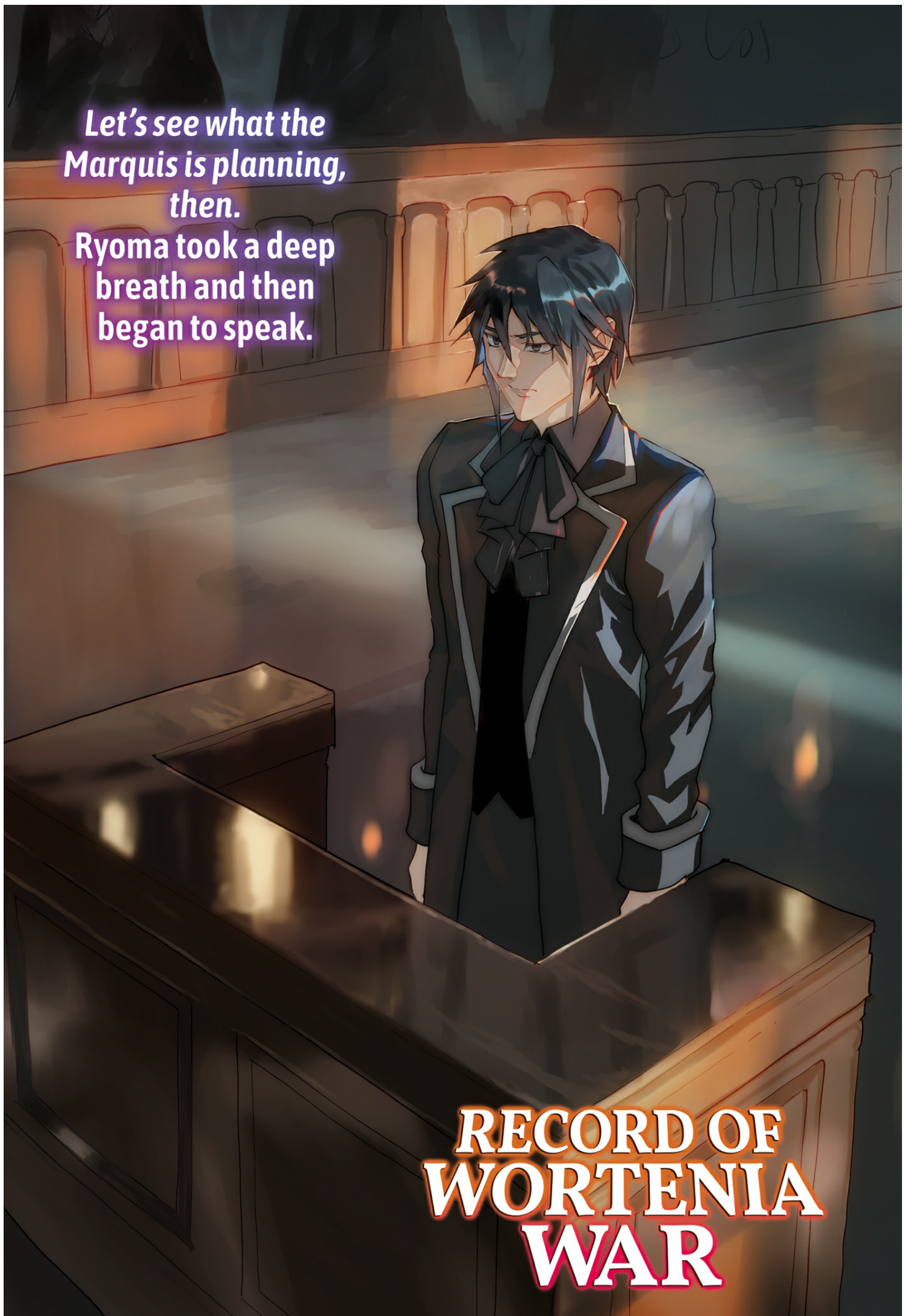
XVII

Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**

Let's see what the
Marquis is planning,
then.

Ryoma took a deep
breath and then
began to speak.



RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



The next second, an intense shock wave blasted into Ryoma's abdomen.

Lione hurried over to Ryoma, while Robert and Signus ordered the nearby troops to scout the area for the attackers.



The contents of Helena's letter were straightforward and succinct, but Ryoma had to read it a few times.

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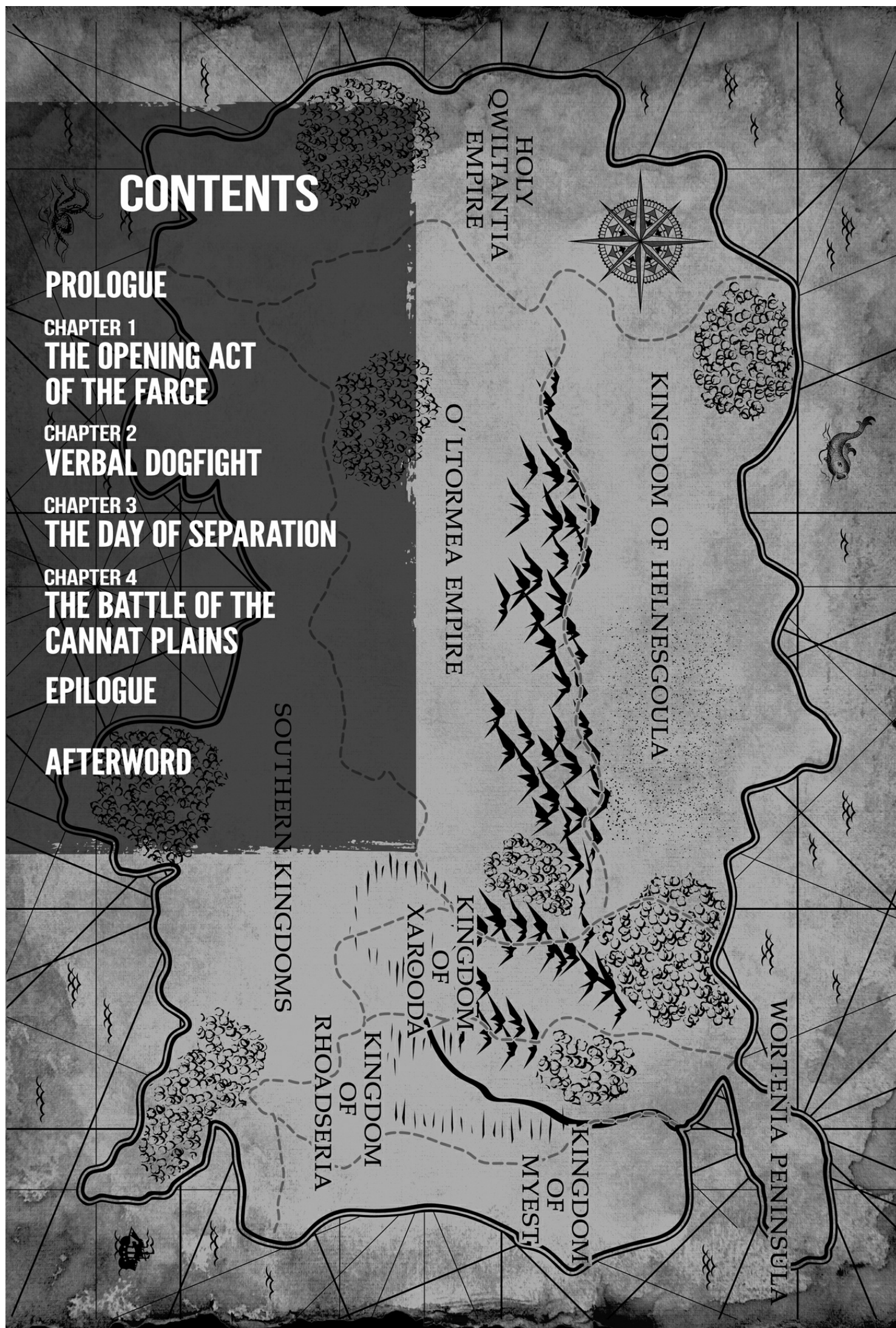
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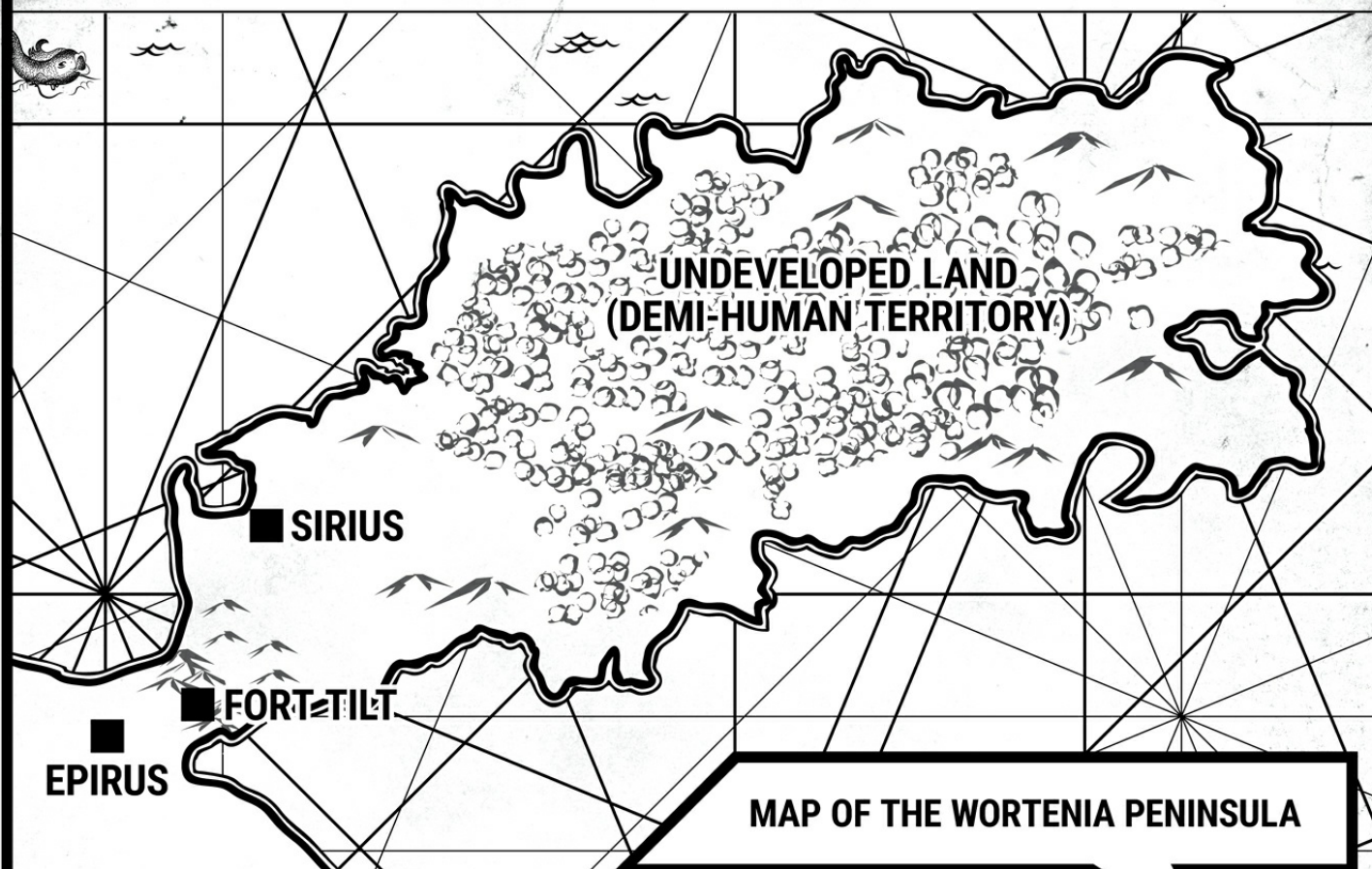
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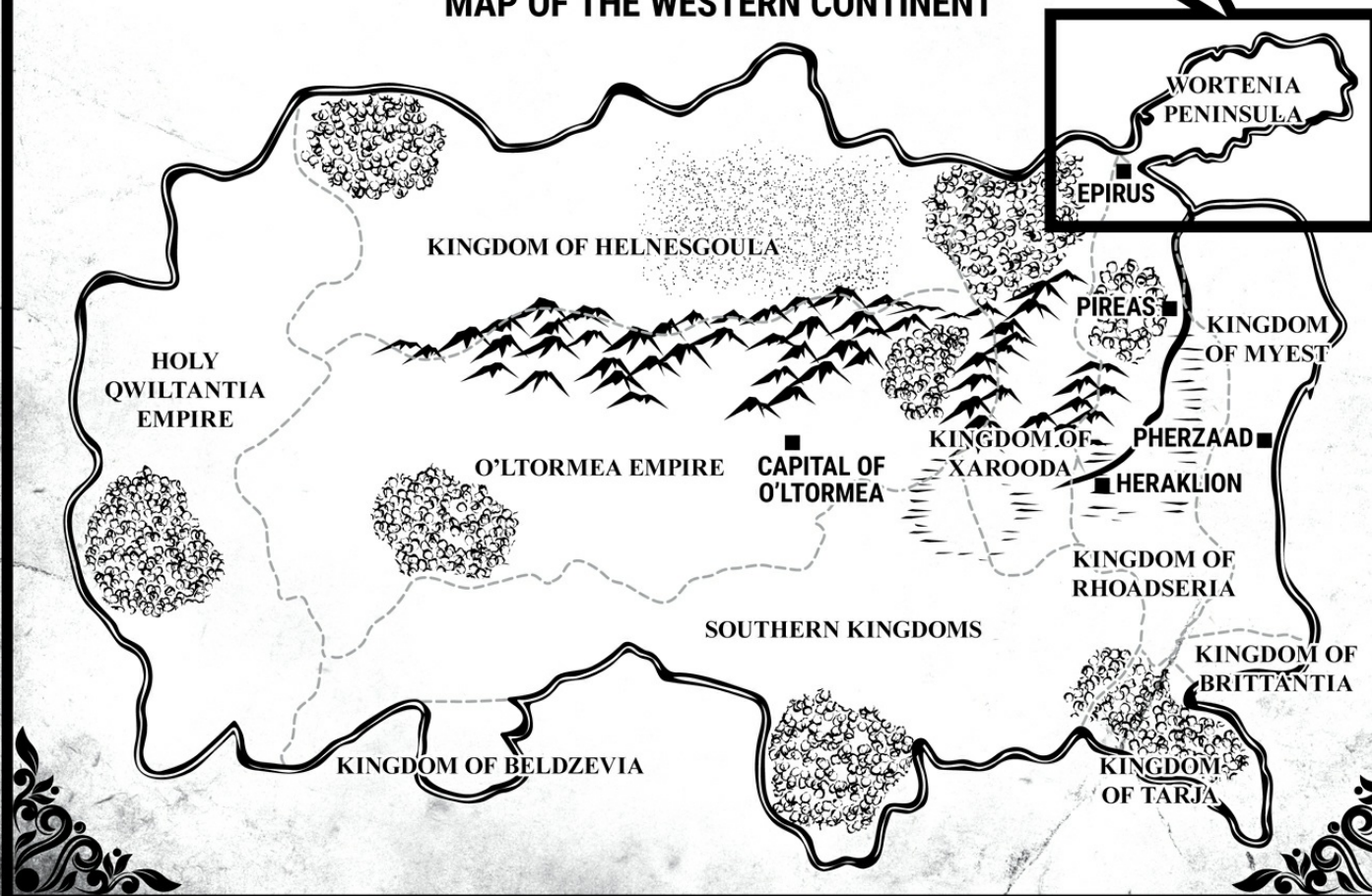
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WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



MAP OF THE WESTERN CONTINENT



Prologue

Gentle, warming sunlight washed over the garden as a pleasant breeze played through Menea's hair. This was the courtyard of the Mars Pavilion, an inn built in a corner of Rhoadseria's capital city, Pireas. This magnificent garden was open to guests, but having been reduced to a shadow of its former glory, very few people passed by this courtyard anymore.

Such a nice breeze... On a day like this, I'd like to go shopping in the market, but...I guess that's not an option right now.

The sky had been cloudy as of late, and this was the first clear, bright day in some time. Normally, this weather would lift one's spirits, but Menea's steps were heavy, burdened by the information that her subordinates, whom she'd sent to scout out the capital, had delivered earlier.

The last thing I want to do right now is provoke Rodney, but...

Following the attack on Count Winzer's estate in Galatia, where Rodney had lost part of his dominant arm, Rodney had practiced with his sword in what seemed like maddened fervor. His behavior had been the very definition of reckless. Even so, perhaps that recklessness had resulted in an epiphany, because he seemed to have regained his calm as of late.

If nothing else, Rodney no longer solely occupied the inn's courtyard, practicing with enough fury to lay waste to the garden's beautiful scenery. That didn't mean that the garden would immediately return to its former glory, though, so it didn't look much different from when he occupied it in madness. Still, he was much calmer than he was before.

Unfortunately, the news Menea was about to relay to Rodney was tantamount to throwing a boulder into a calm lake.

The Organization...

That was the name of the mysterious group manipulating the western continent from behind the scenes. Menea and Rodney were in hot pursuit of

this shadowy Organization, and to them, Asuka Kiryuu held the key to solving the mystery. More specifically, it wasn't Asuka herself who was their lead, but her blood relations. Either way, Asuka would no doubt serve as the link.

The man she called "grandpa," Koichiro Mikoshiba, had brought a katana reinforced with thaumaturgy with him, one that had surely been forged in this world. A man summoned from Rearth possessing such a weapon was exceedingly suspicious. What's more, it was highly likely that Koichiro was behind the attack on Count Winzer's estate. They had no concrete proof of this, of course. Rodney had even asked the attacker if he was Koichiro Mikoshiba, only to be met with silence. That didn't mean much, though, since an assailant wouldn't disclose their name—barring cases like attacks out of revenge.

The fact that the attacker hadn't answered him didn't necessarily prove or dispel the suspicion that he was Koichiro, but the mysterious assailant had cut down Count Winzer yet only severed Rodney's arm. His sparing Rodney was all too suspicious. After all, all the other guards in Count Winzer's estate had been mercilessly dispatched.

I can't imagine the attacker had some kind of strange obsession with simply taking the lives of his victims.

It was more natural to assume that Koichiro Mikoshiba had taken mercy on Rodney, since Rodney was sheltering Koichiro's relative. Rodney had probably come to the same conclusion himself. In fact, Menea suspected that half the reason Rodney threw himself headlong into training after the incident was because of anger and doubt with regards to Asuka.

Sadly, the report Menea had received from her subordinates was only going to shake Rodney's heart all the more.

But if I don't tell him about it, things could get very ugly.

Menea and Rodney weren't sure if Ryoma Mikoshiba was related to Koichiro. They'd heard from Asuka that Koichiro had a grandson named Ryoma, but as far as they knew, it was merely two people with the same name. In a world without photographs or videos, Menea had no way of knowing what Ryoma looked like, barring meeting him in the flesh or seeing a portrait of him. Nonetheless, just because they couldn't prove it didn't necessarily mean it was a mistake or a lie.

If everything she told us is true, then the word “unfortunate” doesn’t even begin to describe this situation.

If something happened once, one could write it off as a coincidence, but if that something, which already had a million in one chance of occurring, then occurred twice, or even thrice over, it wasn’t a coincidence. It was an inevitability.

Either way, they couldn’t ignore the news that Ryoma Mikoshiba’s hearing with the House of Lords was about to begin.

The problem is that there’s only so much we can do in this situation.

Menea and her unit’s role was to serve as guards or vanguards in combat missions. Reconnaissance was outside their wheelhouse. More importantly, Ryoma Mikoshiba was currently a key figure in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. Since the matter required calling such an important person to testify, the kingdom kept news of the hearing under wraps, which was why Menea had only learned of it on the very day of the event.

We’ve received a good deal of funds from Cardinal Roland, but there’s still not much we can do on such short notice.

Menea knew that even if they’d heard of the hearing ahead of time, it wouldn’t have changed the outcome much.

We just don’t have enough troops on hand. I did hear that Cardinal Roland called for reinforcements, but even if they send units stationed in Tarja or Brittantia over, it’ll take time for them to reach us.

The Kingdom of Rhoadseria was located on the continent’s east. The Church of Meneos’s influence here was weaker, and Menea’s forces were limited in number. Under these conditions, any attempt Menea’s side made to negotiate with the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would fail. No negotiations could even take place without military might to back it up. The Church of Meneos was influential enough that Rhoadseria couldn’t deny a request altogether, but they would stretch things out, give a vague answer, and things would end inconclusively.

Either way, I’ll need to calm Rodney down somehow.

As she watched Rodney train with his sword under the large tree planted in

the garden, Menea let out a deep sigh.



At the same time Menea was making her way to Rodney, Lupis Rhoadserians sat in her office in the castle doing paperwork. Hearing her aide, Meltina Lecter, call out to her, she stopped her hands and looked up from the paper. Her refined features were marred by exhaustion from her daily workload.

“What’s the matter?” Lupis asked, sounding terribly tired.

Meltina, hearing the feebleness in her voice, frowned.

Like I thought, she’s completely exhausted.

Normally, Meltina would want nothing more than for her queen to take a break, but right now, Meltina had to deliver a message.

“We sent the bailiff to Count Salzberg’s estate. If all goes well, they should be arriving at the House of Lords any minute now.”

The moment she heard those words, a deep shadow settled over Queen Lupis’s features. After a long silence, she finally nodded.

“I see...”

Her voice was full of conflict and guilt, and the look she gave Meltina seemed to demand something. Although Meltina understood what her queen was asking of her, she didn’t drop her businesslike attitude. She knew that if she were to say anything to Queen Lupis now, the queen would definitely call the whole thing off. But at this point, there was no stopping the plan.

She’s already braced herself for what’s coming, but in the end, her heart is simply too...

The House of Lords had already completed its preparations. Meltina couldn’t tell them to call off the plan now, not after all the time and funds they’d sunk into it.

Whenever it came time to make an important decision, Lupis Rhoadserians always wavered. Her reaction was natural, but for a sovereign, it was the worst possible response. Because of this, Meltina was left to decide how best to handle her liege’s emotions.

Should I be supporting her feelings?

If Meltina were the same woman she'd been in the past, she wouldn't hesitate to act. She would believe that as her queen's vassal, it was her duty to support her beloved liege, for better or worse. Right now, however, Meltina felt differently.

Even if we did call it off out of consideration for Her Majesty's feelings, what would we do then?

Meltina already knew the answer to that question, which was why she had to harden her heart and insist on sticking to their plan. She looked straight into Queen Lupis's eyes and bowed deeply. She then turned around, ignoring the fact that the queen seemed primed to say something.

She's already nearing her limit.

As Meltina left the room, the image of Queen Lupis's exhausted face followed her. In modern society, mental strain and anxiety resulting from overworking was a known cause for depression and bipolar disorder. Any other time, Meltina would have given Queen Lupis a few days to rest and refresh her mind and body.

But with the situation being what it is, we can't afford to give her that kind of time.

A few years had passed since Queen Lupis claimed the throne, and she'd grown accustomed to her duties as monarch. Be that as it may, it was impossible to read the O'ltromea Empire's intentions, and with internal affairs being as volatile as they were, there were too many affairs Queen Lupis had to handle personally.

What's more, things had been getting even worse since a rift had formed between Queen Lupis and Count Bergstone, a key figure in her administration. No matter how much Queen Lupis strove for a regime where the monarch held all the power, she couldn't govern over all military matters *and* internal and external affairs all on her own. Both Queen Lupis and Meltina, who aided her in all of her everyday tasks, knew this, but Count Bergstone's relations with Ryoma Mikoshiba made them both wary of mending things with the count. And then the evening party at Count Salzberg's estate happened.

We should've tried to mend things with him as soon as possible...but it's too late for that now.

Meltina hadn't attended the evening party, but she had received news of what had happened there. She knew just how fatal a blow it was for the country.

Everything is going to change today, though. It must change today.

The thought of what was to come crossed Meltina's mind—a play that would blow away the dark clouds brewing over Rhoadseria in one fell swoop.

Whichever way this goes, it should change things for Her Majesty...

And so Meltina chose to do nothing, no matter how much bloodshed her decision would cause.

Chapter 1: The Opening Act of the Farce

The carriage rolled over a rut carved into a cobblestone path as it advanced toward the castle. Ryoma glanced out the window.

I don't think I've ridden in a carriage since my first visit to Count Salzberg's estate in Epirus. Back then, I wasn't in a position to care, but...

The carriage was furnished with only a wooden seat, and in terms of comfort, it was as bad as it could get. It did have a seat cushion, but it did very little to absorb the carriage's movement. It was merely a lacy pillow that looked like a high-class item but was a terrible cushion.

I don't know if this world doesn't have anything as effective as suspension and shock absorbers, or if this carriage is just of poor quality, but damn, my butt and legs hurt.

Ryoma reached for his backside, feeling a different kind of pain than he did when riding a horse. This was a rather crude gesture for a noble, even a minor one, but there was no one in the carriage but Ryoma. The Malfist sisters, who normally never left Ryoma's side as his maids and bodyguards, were riding in a different carriage.

I don't know if this is just how they do things, or if it's some kind of harassment, but... Well, either way, I'm all alone for the first time in forever. I should relax until we arrive. I don't imagine I'll get attacked right now.

Ryoma thought of his comrades who served as his right hands riding in separate carriages and smiled. He'd considered the possibility that he might be attacked while alone, but given the farce that was about to play out today, the House of Lords would have to keep up appearances. They sought to pass judgment on Ryoma, a famed national hero, so any unnecessary hiccups in the legal process would just make things more difficult for them. Attacking Ryoma on his way to the trial would be detrimental to their goals and would result in rumors that they'd assassinated a hero, further disrupting the public peace and casting more oil on an already burning kingdom.

The House of Lords wanted to hold a legitimate trial against Ryoma, so Ryoma figured an attack now would be highly unlikely, but sometimes people could ignore reason and act recklessly.

Especially considering that some in the House of Lords see me only as a man who killed their relatives.

Ryoma knew the Rhoadserian nobles loathed him. Quite a large group of them had gathered at his dinner party, but considering the sheer number of nobles in Rhoadseria, only a minority had turned up. In addition, blood relations between nobles played a major role. Nobles would kill their own kin without a second thought if it suited their ends, but if an external foe threatened their relatives, they would join forces to fight them off at once.

Regardless of how thick the blood between them was, House Salzberg had many relations, as it was a bloodline that had continued uninterrupted since the kingdom's founding. The count's relatives would seek revenge on Ryoma, and they would do it one of two ways: by violence or by the law.

Choosing to exact revenge on Ryoma through violence proved to be too difficult. Things would have been different if all of Rhoadseria's nobles had united to bring him down, but challenging Ryoma, whose domain was a natural stronghold and who had enough might to defeat Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north, was a daunting task. Compared to such a risk, bringing him to trial for breaking the law and launching a private war on other nobles was much safer and easier. Plus, the nobles' idea aligned with Queen Lupis and Meltina Lecter's plan.

It's hard to tell how much of this is coincidence and how much was planned by Lupis and Meltina.

Given what Lady Yulia had told Ryoma after the war, the royal order for Count Salzberg to spy on the Mikoshiba barony was standard practice to drive a wedge between their two factions. Nonetheless, Ryoma had a hard time believing that Queen Lupis had been planning to mobilize the House of Lords against him at that time. If nothing else, she hadn't implemented this vile, crafty scheme back when she forced Ryoma to accept the governorship of Wortenia. If she was that smart, she probably wouldn't have been so terrified of Ryoma to

begin with.

If I had to say, things only really changed during the expedition to Xarooda.

Queen Lupis had sent Ryoma to the frontier lands of Wortenia, hoping that the no-man's-land would be the death of him. Instead, Ryoma had defied her expectations and built up a solid footing with military might. He'd effectively revealed himself as a new faction that Queen Lupis could no longer ignore, and her natural reaction was to dispose of him. Still, even with the country's entire might at her command, disposing of Ryoma wasn't that simple. If she were to use her authority as monarch to forcibly remove Ryoma from the domain he'd developed with his own resourcefulness, she would make enemies of the nobles who protected their own vested interests. Gaining enemies now, when internal affairs were so unstable, would be fatal to her regime.

This was why Queen Lupis had intentionally chosen not to interfere with the growing rivalry between the Mikoshiba barony and the Salzberg county. Instead, she'd set the two houses against each other so that they would injure and exhaust each other.

As Ryoma mulled this over, he felt the carriage begin to slow down.

Looks like we've arrived.

The carriage stopped. Ryoma picked up Kikoku, which was lying at his side, and rose from his seat.

"Now, I must ask that you leave any weapons with me," Douglas said, extending his hand as Ryoma stepped out of the carriage.

Ryoma cast a probing glance at the bailiff. "You want me to hand over my weapons, eh?"

The House of Lords occupied a section of the palace. The details seemed to differ from case to case, but from what Ryoma had heard, the rules were basically the same there as everywhere else in the palace. And as far as he knew, nobles had the right to enter the palace with their weapons on them. Such was Rhoadserian law, in place since the founding of the kingdom. That said, from Ryoma's perspective as a modern Japanese man, the palace was like the prime minister's office, an exceedingly secure place that served as the core

of politics. Hearing that nobles were allowed to enter the palace with weapons struck him as very strange.

I guess the concept of security differs based on the time period.

Perhaps for this world, where one's security equated to one's own strength, this was entirely reasonable, but even within the castle, there were times when nobles were required to disarm themselves. One such instance was during an audience with the king, and the other was during trials held by the House of Lords. In both cases, it was a fair compromise.

For obvious reasons, it made sense to forbid carrying weapons when one was in the presence of the king. In the case of a trial, the House of Lords mostly dealt with judging criminal acts and arbitrating disputes between nobles. They were essentially the country's supreme court. Since situations where the accused was displeased with their verdict and turned violent weren't unheard of, the House of Lords naturally barred bringing weapons into their jurisdiction. The sole exception were the knights who served as guards directly under the House of Lords.

In that regard, Douglas's demand that Ryoma relinquish his weapon was correct and in line with his position as bailiff. However, even though Douglas was justified, legally speaking, Ryoma's status as a national hero changed things.

"I was under the impression that the summons was merely to confirm what happened," Ryoma said.

Sensing the meaning behind Ryoma's words, Douglas cracked an obscene smile. The fact that he didn't retract his extended hand showed he had no intention of budging.

"Yes, I've heard the same, but kingdom law demands that you disarm yourself, my lord. Even a renowned hero such as yourself is not above the law."

Douglas cited the law with a straight face, yet he'd just accepted a bribe earlier. Ryoma was, in a way, impressed with how utterly shameless Douglas was. Regardless, everything had gone as Ryoma had expected.

I see... So he doesn't view it as if I bribed him. He just took advantage of my

giving him money. Efficient, I suppose.

The requirement to discard one's weapons before entering the House of Lords' jurisdiction was indeed the law, so the bailiff's actions were justified. Except, unlike having an audience with the king, there was room for leeway in this situation. If Ryoma had been summoned as an accused defendant, he would be required to disarm himself, but since he was just a witness, the bailiff could allow him in without handing over his weapons. In other words, one could bribe their way out of the prohibition or simply convince a person with authority to relent.

Despite that, Douglas insisted Ryoma disarm himself. Moreover, a dozen to two dozen of the House of Lords' knights were surrounding the carriage. Though they didn't draw their swords, they had every intention of mercilessly forcing the issue depending on Ryoma's response.

"Or do you intend to resist here?" Douglas prodded.

At that, the knights took a step forward. Ryoma glanced at Kikoku, which he gripped with his left hand.

I guess drawing Kikoku here would be a pretty bad idea.



If he were to bring Kikoku's power to bear, he could possibly break through this situation with brute strength. Due to his battle with Count Salzberg, Kikoku had absorbed a great deal of prana and had come to accept Ryoma as its master to some extent. While he couldn't wield it to perfection yet, Ryoma could draw out the cursed sword's hidden powers. If he were to use Kikoku alongside the Igasaki ninjas he'd placed to guard him from the shadows, he could cut down any number of knights, who were only capable of using martial thaumaturgy, and break through their encirclement.

Nevertheless, this route would make Ryoma a criminal, and that would render all his preparations so far meaningless. The House of Lords upheld Rhoadseria's laws; if he were to reject their demands and draw his blade on them, no excuse would exonerate him. Queen Lupis would surely mobilize a large-scale army against the Mikoshiba barony, and with that kind of just cause at her side, even the nobles who weren't loyal to her would be hard-pressed to defy her demands.

If I just agree and disarm myself, that's fine by them. But if I resort to force and we make our escape, it would give them legitimate cause to attack us. The House of Lords are pulling this guy's strings, and that's probably what they're going for here. Not a bad plan, all in all.

From Douglas's perspective, his objective was to provoke Ryoma to get him to rebel—an orthodox and guaranteed method to eliminate an opponent.

I don't have a choice. I'll have to comply and leave Kikoku here. The issue is what comes next. I'll just have to rely on the Igasaki clan.

If Ryoma left Kikoku with Douglas, how would he get it back? If it was just an ordinary katana, he could easily have it replaced, but Kikoku was a one-of-a-kind weapon passed down in the Igasaki clan for generations. He couldn't leave it behind. Still, given the situation, the only people he could trust with the sword were the Igasaki ninjas guarding him from the shadows.

Sensing Ryoma's apprehension, Kikoku trembled gently in his grip. It was either displeased with the idea of leaving its master's side or, perhaps, disgusted with the prospect of an unfamiliar man touching it. Ryoma had no choice, however, so Kikoku would have to put up with it.

Don't be like that. I knew this was possible, but you wouldn't hear of it. I'll pick you up as soon as I can, so just be patient.

Maybe the sword read Ryoma's thoughts, because it stopped trembling.

Ryoma handed the katana to Douglas. The bailiff's provocation wasn't over yet, though.

"Yes, very good. That just leaves...the body check, and then we'll be done."

Douglas's words were the final thrust to gouge out his opponent's heart.

"A body check? Are you really going to go that far?" Ryoma sighed, exasperated. He realized just how palpable the enmity Douglas and the people pulling his strings had for him truly was.

"My apologies, my lord, but we've heard tales of you wielding projectiles called chakrams. I must ask that you submit to this check, as disrespectful as it may be," Douglas said, bowing his head collectedly.

Hearing this, Ryoma couldn't very well refuse the bailiff. He took the leather bag that contained the chakrams out from his clothes and handed it to Douglas. The law only prohibited bladed weapons, but one would assume that included other armaments too, such as spears and battle-axes. The question was whether chakrams counted as well.

I doubt this country has laws for weapons like this.

The law likely didn't list them, since chakrams were rare in this world, so one could claim that the law didn't classify them as weapons. Despite this, it was clear from the situation that arguing his point wouldn't work, so Ryoma concluded that there wasn't a point in protesting any longer. He spread his arms to the sides and held them at shoulder length. He felt like he was being inspected by clerks at the airport after triggering a metal detector.

Douglas gave Ryoma a dubious look, but he soon realized Ryoma's intentions and signaled with his eyes to the nearby knights.

"If you'd like, I could change into another outfit?" Ryoma mused in displeasure as the knights' hands groped about his body. "As far as I know, there's no law saying you have to change outfits before visiting the House of

Lords, so I didn't bring a change of clothes. If you have any that fit my size, I'll gladly put them on."

As he spoke, intense indignation and bloodlust rolled off of Ryoma. He wasn't serious, of course; this was merely a taunt. "Make me do it, if you have the courage to dare." But his provocative words and the bloodlust coming from him made everyone around him freeze. They had all remembered just who they were dealing with. The knights giving him the body check took a few steps back, and Douglas went pale as Ryoma gazed straight into his eyes.

After several seconds of silence, Douglas finally said, "No, we won't have to go that far. And I want you to understand we are doing this out of duty to the House of Lords." Douglas then bowed his head respectfully to Ryoma.

After the argument at the drop-off point, Ryoma passed through a sturdy gate leading into a large, spacious garden. Standing ahead was a white three-story building. Looming behind it were two spires serving as watchtowers. Rows of fully armed knights were lined up on both sides of the trail.

It'd be optimistic to assume this is all to guard an important figure.

Nobles were VIPs in this world, but that wasn't to say they were all treated equally. A count was only one rank above a viscount, but that difference was significant. It affected where one's carriage could stop, how soon one could get an audience at the palace, and countless other circumstances. Above a count were higher titles, like a marquis and a duke. When it came to the highest rank, royalty, there was no comparison with a baron.

That said, not even royals would have such a large host of guards for an escort, so the fact that Ryoma did meant one of two things. The first was that Ryoma was more valuable than a royal. He was famously known as the Devil of Heraklion, and many people looked up to him as a national hero. Such a man was visiting, and while his title wasn't that of a major noble, some might have considered him worthy of special attention.

They say even major VIPs can be criminals. Looks like they're right.

Ryoma was being sarcastic, but his assessment wasn't wrong. In any country, prisons were guarded closely at all times.

Ryoma advanced down the trail lined with knights. It seemed the House of Lords were very wary of him, but what was the intention behind their caution?

From the looks on their faces, they don't seem very welcoming. Which means...

The host of guards were there because of the second option—they saw Ryoma as a threat.

Not that I was expecting a warm welcome, but it looks like I have a very difficult hearing ahead of me.

As Ryoma continued to analyze the situation, he walked calmly toward his destination.



How much time had passed since?

Three hours? It can't be that little...

Based on his rumbling stomach, it must have been roughly five or six hours.

Ryoma had been led to a room without any windows, where he now lay on a sofa, glaring up into the air. As soon as Douglas had seen Ryoma settled, he'd made himself scarce and went off somewhere.

The way Ryoma was lying down was uncouth for a noble, but no one was around to see him anyway. Besides, when he asked to go to the toilet, a knight had handed him a bedpan of sorts. Fortunately, the bedpan in question was presentable. It was presumably made for nobility to use, because it was made of porcelain and adorned with a floral design. It was pretty fancy, as bedpans went, and unlike the plastic and glass chamber pots used for medical purposes, it was opaque. Even so, Ryoma was rather opposed to doing his business with this thing. He didn't remember ever having used a bedpan before either.

I don't know if it's true or not, but they say the Palace of Versailles in France had no toilets, so nobles had to either use bedpans or do their business out back, in the dark.

This was just something he'd read online before being summoned to this world, so Ryoma had no way of knowing if it was true, but if this information

was to be believed, then Ryoma's image of the cultured French nobility was markedly different from reality. Of course, Ryoma's impression was the skewed perception of a foreigner who didn't know the reality of the time and place.

Plus, it makes sense that the standard of living and ways of thinking would differ between the modern day and the sixteenth century.

Either way, this world was perhaps an improvement over sixteenth-century France. If nothing else, this world had toilets. They didn't flush, though, so they used cesspools and privies similar to the ones found in the countryside of Ryoma's world. Also, they were limited in number. They weren't on every corner like in modern society. Still, there was a world of difference between something being presently unusable and it not existing outright.

It's fine. I didn't really want to go to the bathroom, but... I mean, they won't even serve me anything to eat.

Ryoma hadn't come to the House of Lords for leisure, so maybe expecting food was entitled of him. Plus, considering that they might have poisoned it, he wouldn't have eaten anything they served him anyway.

Any ordinary noble would throw a tantrum and demand to speak to the person in charge.

He was, after all, left neglected in this small, confined room, without any food or even a glass of water. Ryoma was all alone here, which was unusual in its own way.

The carriages behind his had ferried Lady Yulia, as well as Robert and Signus, who were likewise called in as witnesses. The Malfist twins, dressed as maids, had accompanied him as well. The fact that he was placed in separate rooms from Lady Yulia and the other witnesses was understandable, since they didn't want witnesses coordinating their testimonies, but if this was the reason, they would have called into question the fact Ryoma and the others had been staying in Count Salzberg's estate before the hearing. They didn't, however, so placing them in separate rooms at this point was meaningless. Furthermore, separating a noble from his personal caretakers and servants, who were no different from their very limbs, was quite problematic.

Is this just an attempt at harassing me?

Many of the nobles belonging to the House of Lords had blood ties with House Salzberg and the ten houses of the north, so they were hostile toward Ryoma. But while many of them were aristocrats, they didn't have any influence or power. If they were up against a commoner, they could oppress them to no end, but they couldn't do much to another noble. Very few of them could resort to assassination or other such forceful measures.

But, well, so be it. I predicted all of this.

Ryoma wasn't harboring any kind of expectation that the House of Lords would treat him fairly. The chances of that were at best ten percent. He also had countermeasures in place for such possibilities.

From the looks of it, we'll have to go with... Hm, plan B... No, maybe plan C.

Depending on how the House of Lords would act, Ryoma had prepared three plans ahead of time, and each plan branched based on whether the nobles were friendly, neutral, or hostile toward him. That said, of the several plans he had, he wasn't very keen on resorting to plan C. It struck him as extreme, yet he couldn't deny it might be necessary if he was to protect himself and his allies.

I already had the Igasaki clan handle recovering Kikoku. That just leaves...

Ryoma continued to assess the situation as he waited for time to pass.



They could hear the sound of someone whistling inside the room. The tune was melancholic and rhythmic, the register shifting from low to high to low again. Some people claimed that whistling didn't qualify as music, but a skilled whistler could produce a tone indistinguishable from an orchestral instrument. But the quality of the tune and the instrument being used wasn't the issue right now.

"Hey... There it is again," said a knight standing by Ryoma's door to his partner. His voice was muffled because of his helmet, but it was easy to imagine that his expression was contorted in confusion. His partner probably felt the same.

"Yeah, what's that boy thinking? I mean, he might be an upstart, but he's still a noble."

“Maybe he doesn’t know why he’s here?”

“I doubt that. Question is, what do we do about him?”

Would they stop him, or would they overlook his impromptu performance? There weren’t any rules against whistling, and it wasn’t a crime, so did the guards have any right to stop him? On the other hand, the situation being what it was, it was inappropriate, and common sense dictated that given the place, the knights should stop his whistling right away.

The upstart was in the jurisdiction of Rhoadseria’s House of Lords, essentially a supreme court and a solemn symbol of the kingdom’s authority second only to the palace’s audience chamber itself. Whether it was normal to whistle, decorum and appearances mattered here, and they required that people remain silent. Not to mention, no noble would whistle in the House of Lords to begin with, so this issue was without precedent. Unfortunately for these two guards, they had to deal with such a situation.

It’s one irregularity after another...

The knights guarding Ryoma had been secretly ordered by their superior, the House of Lords’ director, to keep a close watch on him. Making a noble wait for so long, and in a room like this, was very unusual, to say nothing of separating him from his entourage. Plus, from what the guards had heard, his sword had been confiscated too. When it came time for him to go to the assembly hall where the hearing would be held, he would have to leave his weapons behind anyway, but that was much different from leaving them behind at the entrance to the House of Lords.

Of course, the knights had their own opinions about the man they were guarding. He’d gained the title of baron at such a young age and was famous for his skills as a warrior, so the knights admired and envied them. They were reaching their midlife years and weren’t likely to ever achieve either of those things, but they didn’t detest Ryoma or want to entrap or harass him.

“Let’s wait and see for now. I’m sure the higher-ups will say something if it’s not allowed,” one of the knights said.

The other knight nodded and replied, “Right.”

The knights had a vague idea of what the House of Lords' top brass were planning, but that didn't mean they were going to help the man they were watching. They weren't willing to take the brunt of the fire either way. They simply stood in front of the room, listening to the whistling and waiting for the hearing to start.



While Ryoma was pleasantly whiling away the time in his suffocating room, a heated battle of words was taking place in the House of Lords. Located on the far end of the first floor of the palace was a room otherwise known as the Grand Courtroom. There, the twenty members of the House of Lords, including the judges and prosecutors, were engaged in an exchange with Robert Bertrand.

"Lord Robert Bertrand," one of the judges cried, his voice full of surprise and dread. "Are you saying you have no intention of criticizing Baron Mikoshiba for the atrocities he committed in his private war against Count Salzberg? You do not blame him for the death of your father and brother?"

Needless to say, the judge wasn't dreading Robert's response. Robert was a terrifying warrior, but this was a hearing at the House of Lords. It was basically—although not officially—a trial, meaning that martial might had little worth here. This judge had no reason to fear Robert. Realistically speaking, though, he was scared of Robert. The fact that Robert wasn't blaming Ryoma for his actions was incomprehensible, and that worried him.

Blood ties were important to Rhoadseria's nobility, so a child was expected to show absolute obedience to their father and to seek revenge should their parents be killed. It was much like how it'd been in ages past in Ryoma's world, when seeking revenge for the death of one's parents was expected. This idea might seem old-fashioned, anachronistic even, but it was prevalent in this world still—on the surface anyway. One was expected to at least act as if revenge was their intent.

This half-hearted commitment was to be expected, perhaps. After all, other factors, such as pedigree and reputation, also greatly mattered to the nobility; morals and honor were secondary. It wasn't that they didn't care for those

things, though. They wouldn't hesitate to use them as a pretense to corner their foes if it suited their ends, but as long as their family name remained untarnished, they could compromise on anything else. If there was one hill a noble would die on, it would be the preservation of their family's honor. This was why, to the nobles present, Robert's words were utterly incomprehensible.

People like them will never understand how I feel, Robert thought.

Robert wasn't going to argue against the idea that children ought to obey their parents, but he believed that they didn't have to tolerate everything their parents did to them. A child shouldn't have to consent to being treated like a slave. Even slaves had the right to resist—though they did get whipped for their insubordination.

"I ask you once more, Lord Robert Bertrand. Are you saying you acknowledge and support Baron Mikoshiba's private war?"

Honestly, Robert wished he could snap, shout at them to shut up, and then sink his fist half a dozen or so times into this man's smug face. Robert had fashioned his fists as weapons on the battlefield, and they were just as lethal as any armament. Plus, he was up against nobles who'd never known the battlefield, so his punch could very well rupture their heads like watermelons.

That would feel good, that's for sure...

If this hearing were about Robert himself, he probably wouldn't have restrained himself from attacking. These fools were intolerable, and Robert wasn't a tolerant man to begin with. He could feel his stress building, but he knew he couldn't lose his temper. Not yet.

Serving under a master isn't easy...

In the past, Robert had never imagined a day would come when he would swear his service to another. Even when he'd worked under Count Salzberg, he'd never thought of him as his master. He'd felt indebted to the man, and while others might not have had the best opinion of the count, Robert was fond enough of him to call him his "old man." But in the end, it had merely been a transaction between equals. He'd lent Count Salzberg his martial strength, and although Count Salzberg hadn't paid him for it, their relationship had been similar that of a mercenary and a client.

Things were different now. Robert did serve a master—a man burning with ambition and ideals. A man he was willing to die for. A master who, considering how young people married in this world, was young enough to be his son. Ryoma's youth made it difficult for some people to believe in him, but his age was inconsequential to Robert. What mattered was that he'd finally found a master he was willing to give his life for as a warrior.

Robert finally answered, repeating his words once more, though he knew it was likely a meaningless gesture.



Pale moonlight seeped through the window into the director's room on the second floor of the House of Lords. It was nearly midnight. Sitting in the room was the director, Marquis Halcyon, and the other officials of the House of Lords. They were seated on sofas, their expressions full of confusion and doubt. The same could be said of Marquis Halcyon. He was resting his elbows on his desk, and his chin on his hands, and his features were contorted in annoyance.

The vice director of the House of Lords, Count Eisenbach, sighed. "This is quite a troubling development, isn't it, Director?"

During the hearing, there had been one unexpected development after another. The inquiry had dragged on longer than expected, and though it was supposed to end today, it had to be extended for another day. It was highly unusual for a trial to continue like this when the House of Lords' verdict was all but decided already. Most unexpected of all was that the witnesses were so uncooperative.

"Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria... I heard those two were both difficult sorts, but I didn't think they'd be *this* difficult."

The judges and prosecutors of the House of Lords had applied a great deal of pressure on them, but Robert and Signus wouldn't budge from their stances. Robert had continually taunted Marquis Halcyon and his aides, whereas Signus had calmly and indifferently repeated the facts. The two of them were like fire and ice, but their animosity for the House of Lords was clear to all.

Robert and Signus weren't the only issues either. The other nobles had given equally unacceptable testimonies.

“Those two are a problem, but Lady Yulia Salzberg is even worse. Who could have expected she’d brazenly defend Baron Mikoshiba after he killed her husband. No wonder they call her a vile woman. She’s shameless.”

The other men in attendance all hummed and nodded in agreement. When it came to Robert and Signus, they’d heard the rumors and suspected that the Twin Blades would side with Ryoma, especially since their relationships with their families had been so strained. In Signus’s case, it wasn’t merely that he’d been mistreated by his family; he’d been abused.

If only they hadn’t rejected us like this, I might have welcomed them into my family as son-in-laws. But we’re long past that point now, it seems...

This thought had crossed not only Count Eisenbach’s mind, but also the minds of most of the nobles in attendance. Robert and Signus were both bachelors—healthy, virile men in their midthirties. Robert was a legitimate son, but he wasn’t in any position to inherit the headship of his house, and Signus was a bastard. As far as the nobility was concerned, they were by no means desirable mates, but that was assuming that they were unremarkable men. Instead, the two of them stood out from their peers with their impressive martial prowess. They were known to be two of the strongest men in the kingdom, having earned the title of Count Salzberg’s Twin Blades. With such glory on their side, many noble daughters would be inclined to marry them.

In fact, many members of the House of Lords had been interested in having Robert or Signus marry into their families, and both men had had plenty of chances to rise to fame. Be that as it may, their families had time and again squandered those chances, which was ample reason for these two to resent their relatives.

Blood relations run deep, but grudges between family members can run even deeper.

Children could end up loathing their parents, and parents could end up detesting their children. Of course, such scandals were a stain on the family name, and for that reason, House Bertrand and House Galveria had tried to stifle the rumors around them. To those who’d achieved a certain degree of power and influence, however, neither family’s efforts did anything to keep the

rumors from spreading.

Everyone present in this room knew about Robert's and Signus's plights, so they weren't terribly surprised that the Twin Blades had defended Ryoma after he'd reached out to them and saved them from their circumstances. However, they had not expected Yulia Salzberg to testify as she did. While she was known as a vile woman who yielded to no man, there had been no open discord between her and Count Salzberg. That she'd exposed her husband's corruption and his disloyalty to the kingdom was a painful blow for the House of Lords. Her testimony could potentially support Ryoma's claims that he'd gone to war in the name of Rhoadseria's order and prosperity.

"But since we approached this as a hearing..." began Viscount Therese, one of the officials.

Even if the witnesses refused to blame Ryoma Mikoshiba, there was nothing the House of Lords could accuse them of. This hearing was meant to be fair and neutral, so they had to keep up that front, although everyone present knew that this was only a pretense.

"Yes, but with the way things are proceeding, our initial plan will go awry," Count Eisenbach said with a sigh.

What they needed was proof that Ryoma had destroyed Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north for personal reasons. So long as they had that, they could finish this affair easily, but gaining even a single bit of incriminating evidence had proved harder than expected.

We may as well resort to torture, Count Eisenbach thought, irritated.

Just then, they heard a knock on the door.

"Who's there?" called Count Eisenbach, the vice director of this council.

"My apologies," answered the director's secretary from behind the door. "I have an urgent report."

Recognizing the secretary's voice, Count Eisenbach turned his eyes to the room's owner. Usually, the director would be shouting at his secretary for intruding during such a busy time, but if they still came even after being told to not disrupt their meeting, it must be an urgent report indeed.

Count Eisenbach nodded at Marquis Halcyon, hoping that this interruption would bring a development that would help them break this stalemate.



As the House of Lords' top brass were discussing their policy going forward, a woman was entering a mansion in one of Pireas's wealthy neighborhoods. The pale moonlight shining down on the city was the very opposite of sunlight overflowing with the vigor of life. It was a softer glow, filled with a mother's tender love, yet it did little to give the woman's heart any peace.

The woman was Helena Steiner, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's fabled general and a knight of valor hailed as a goddess of war. But right now, this war hero's face was strained with sorrow.

Should I really have come here? The Igasaki clan's report says things are going as planned...

Helena would have normally refused to come, the occasion being what it was. No matter how meticulous Ryoma's plan was, it would be meaningless if the people involved didn't follow the script. She should have been occupied with ensuring all went as planned, with no time whatsoever to get involved in other business, yet knowing this, Helena still chose to come here.

I can't believe anything this man says, but on the off chance he's telling the truth, I...

She thought back to what Akitake Sudou had told her during their meeting yesterday. Helena didn't fully believe him. For starters, the timing was too good; the news had come just as Helena had resolved to choose a new future for herself. In addition, Akitake Sudou and his offer were extremely suspicious.

Sudou was the same person who'd operated in the shadows for Duke Gelhart in the civil war, and she'd heard whispers that he secretly advised Mikhail, who was by now an enemy to her side. It wasn't clear what Sudou's endgame was, but Ryoma was so wary of him that he employed his intelligence network to keep full tabs on Sudou.

Helena wasn't naive enough to accept anything Sudou said, but given the nature of what he'd told her, she couldn't ignore his words altogether.

It's all because of this pendant. It's the real thing. There's no mistaking that.

Her eyes fell to the pendant in her hand. The locket's fastener had been removed.

Just then, Helena heard a knock at the door. "May I come in?" someone asked.

It was a man's voice—the exact voice she wanted to hear least right now. But her personal feelings aside, she couldn't move past this unless she saw where it took her.

"Yes, come in," Helena prompted.

At that, Akitake Sudou entered the room. "I apologize. Did I keep you waiting?"

The fact that the first thing he did was apologize indicated that he was being very considerate of Helena's state of mind.

Even so, it's likely this is all just a sham.

Akitake Sudou looked like the kind of middle-aged man you could find anywhere—nothing about his looks even hinted at a warrior's mettle or ambition—but that was just how he appeared on the surface.

Is he like a snake or a scorpion? Or maybe he's more like a poisonous spider, lying in wait in its web? Either way, I'd never come anywhere near him unless the situation necessitated it.

What scared Helena the most weren't warriors like Signus and Robert—ferocious lions who lorded over the jungle—but tricksters with fake, vile smiles like Sudou's. He was a serpent that crept in the underbrush, but despite her fear, Helena had no choice but to deal with him right now.

"No need to let that bother you. I'm the one who asked you to spare some of your time tonight," Helena said, motioning for Sudou to take a seat on a sofa by the window.

It was strange for Helena, the guest in this scenario, to ask Sudou to sit, but Sudou nodded eagerly and sat down.

"Oh, don't mention it, my lady. Meeting Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War is

a great honor. I'm actually quite beside myself."



“No need for flattery. I’m just an old woman. People who call me a goddess of war only think of my past achievements. Besides, I did meet you already yesterday, and now you say you’re nervous? You take your jesting too far.”

As she spoke, Helena elegantly covered her mouth and laughed. She was obviously being sarcastic, but Sudou wasn’t fazed by her response.

“Oh, that’s not true. After all, you’ve been making quite a few moves recently...”

Helena wasn’t nearly oblivious enough to miss the implication behind his words.

I can’t let my guard down around him. He’s sharp. A match for that boy, even.

But, at the same time, she knew better than to let her emotions show on her face.

“Well, since I’ve decided to return from retirement, I figure I may as well do my best for this country’s well-being.”

“Of course. I completely understand that any decisions you’ve made, you did so out of the deepest love and concern for the kingdom.”

They glared at each other, invisible sparks flying between their eyes, but it lasted for only a moment before Helena eventually sighed and shrugged. Sudou was a serpent of a man, the kind one should never let down their guard with, but Helena had come to this mansion for a different reason tonight.

“Let’s do away with the verbal jabs and cut to the chase, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s.” Sudou smiled. “Whiling away the hours in an intellectual discussion with you would be a delight, Lady Helena, but our time is limited. Now then...”

Sudou picked up a bell from the nearby desk and rang it. Almost immediately, someone gently knocked on the door. They’d been standing outside the door, waiting to be called, it seemed.

“Come in,” Sudou said.

“Excuse me.”

The door opened, and Helena immediately rose from the sofa. Seeing the features of the woman who walked in, Helena felt her breath catch in her throat. The woman had short, wavy blonde hair, and she stood slightly taller than Helena. Based on the leather armor she was wearing, she was either a mercenary or an adventurer.

The woman stood wordlessly beside Sudou, but from how she conducted herself, it was clear she was an experienced warrior. What shocked Helena the most, though, wasn't the woman's combat experience.

She looks like...me, like what I looked like in my youth...

Their hairstyles differed, but she was the splitting image of Helena's younger visage.

"S-Saria...?" Helena couldn't stop the name from slipping out of her mouth. "Are you really Saria?"

Saria was the name of Helena's daughter, who'd been dragged into Helena's political conflict and died. This shouldn't have been possible, yet the woman gave Helena a curt nod.

"Yes, mother."

The instant she heard those words, Helena's eyes filled with tears. At the same time, Helena's warrior instincts raised an alarm.

This is...too good to be true.

The daughter she'd believed dead turned out to be alive. She ought to have rejoiced. Given the portrait in the locket Sudou had delivered to her the day prior, it was highly possible that this woman was her daughter. Still, there was no absolute proof. This world had no blood or DNA tests, so Helena tested the possibility in the best, most certain way she could.

"Then, could you show me your shoulder?"

This was an inappropriate request to make of a young woman, especially with a man present in the same room, but Helena didn't ask Sudou to leave, and the woman didn't seem offended by her request either. She acted as if this had all been planned ahead of time.

The woman did as she asked, undoing her leather armor and exposing her left shoulder. Just this single gesture melted away all of Helena's caution. Helena had asked the woman to show her shoulder, but she hadn't specified which one. If this girl was an impostor pretending to be Saria, she surely would have been confused by Helena's request, yet she said nothing.

Not so much as a doubt...

Helena wordlessly approached the woman and lovingly patted her shoulder. There were three moles there, positioned in a triangular shape.

Aah... It really is her...

Faced with the unmistakable proof that this was really her daughter, Helena's suppressed feelings of joy finally erupted, and she burst into tears.

Sudou simply watched, the devil's smile on his lips.



Morning already...

Ryoma slowly opened his eyes, awakening from his slumber faceup on the sofa. Without any windows or a watch, he had to rely on his internal clock, and since he knew it was accurate, he could tell that he'd spent an entire day and night in this room. Based on how his stomach was rumbling, there was no doubting that.

So they left me unattended here for nearly a day.

The House of Lords had called Ryoma for a hearing, only to leave him all alone in a tiny room with hardly any furniture. Any other Rhoadserian noble would have lost their temper after such mistreatment, but Ryoma remained calm. The sofa, no different from the recliner chairs one could find in a manga café, was large enough to accommodate his large frame and serve as a makeshift bed. Apart from his legs dangling a bit off the edge, Ryoma didn't mind sleeping on it. He'd have appreciated a pillow and blanket, though.

In any case, this was certainly no way to treat a noble. Ryoma wasn't sure if the House of Lords was just harassing him or if something unexpected had happened.

Either way, today should be different. If it's not and nothing changes, will I have to use the Igasaki clan?

Ryoma had sent the Igasaki ninjas beforehand to infiltrate the House of Lords, so he could have them procure food and tell him what was going on outside, but if he sent them on incursions that weren't part of the initial plan, he'd run the risk of the House of Lords discovering their movements. When it came to Kikoku, that was both his personal weapon and the Igasaki clan's prized sword, so he had no choice but to order them to retrieve it, but he couldn't afford to take any further risks. Compared to the plan's success, hunger was something he could endure.

But if I'm too obedient, that might cause problems too. It's hard to maintain a balance in this situation.

Acting like an unassuming, docile prisoner would seem suspicious to his captors. To be convincing, he had to look at least somewhat defiant, then disgruntled once his complaints fell on deaf ears. Still, the House of Lords wasn't going to let him starve to death.

He could hear the sound of footsteps coming from the corridor outside, and before long, they stopped before his door. He then heard the tinkling of someone rummaging through a key chain...and the door opened.

Standing there were three fully armed guards. One of them carried a tray with what looked to be a meal on it. The two guards behind him were apparently his escorts. They stood there, looking much too imposing and pretentious given what they were delivering. It was obvious they didn't trust Ryoma at all. They placed the tray on the table and left without a word.

"Huh." Ryoma glanced at the tray and smiled. "So they finally decided to give me something to eat."

This was his first meal in the last twenty-four hours. That said, the meal they'd delivered was wholly unappetizing. The bread looked several days old, and the bowl of soup was cold. It wasn't simply a modest meal; they were giving him leftovers and scraps.

I mean, I wouldn't eat anything they gave me even if it was a delicacy, so I guess you could say they made it easier for me.

Ryoma dumped the meal into the bedpan sitting in the room's corner, but he wasn't throwing a childish tantrum over the food's quality. He was in the middle of a battle right now, and he was in the House of Lords—the heart of enemy territory. He wasn't brave enough to eat any food the enemy served him. It was too risky. In truth, they didn't even have to poison him to death. All they'd need to do was slip in a paralyzing agent to render him immobile.

If Ryoma were in modern Japan, suspecting that his food had been poisoned would have made him seem mad. Unless one had substantial proof to back their claim, they would mostly be ridiculed for being paranoid. But Ryoma was a warrior in this world and therefore had to be wary of poisoning.

Knowing not to touch any food or drink your enemy served you was a basic understanding that one had to master before they even began practicing martial arts. Poison was an effective way to eliminate enemies, after all. Take, for example, western silverware. Silver utensils were beautiful, to be sure, but back when rulers had to be constantly wary of poisoning, they served as a warning bell—silver turned black when exposed to arsenic.

It was a historical fact that this had occurred in both the western and eastern sides of the world. Unless Ryoma was on the verge of starvation, he would never touch any food they served him. Nonetheless, he wasn't angry or dissatisfied that he couldn't eat. In fact, he was pleased they'd served him anything at all.

So things are finally starting to move.

As terrible as it was, this meal indicated that the House of Lords intended to act. If Ryoma's estimate was correct, knights would shortly arrive at his door. The question was whether they'd be calling him to a hearing or stepping in to execute him without question.

Whichever it is, it's fine by me, but...

As he lay on the sofa, Ryoma gently massaged his right wrist. Confirming the sensation in his left palm, he smiled in satisfaction and closed his eyes once more. Not long after, Ryoma sensed someone's presence outside the door—someone besides the guards—and opened his eyes. He once again heard a key chain jingle, then a familiar figure opened the door.

“Oh, Mr. Hamilton,” Ryoma greeted the man. The bailiff was escorted by two guards. “Good morning. It’s been, what, a day?”

Being a baron, Ryoma didn’t need to address someone like Douglas, but he did so knowingly. His loafing on the sofa dispelled any politeness the greeting might have had, but Douglas didn’t react with anger. Instead, he humbly returned Ryoma’s greeting.

“G-Good morning... My apologies for having kept you waiting...”

Douglas must have felt uncomfortable to be acting so awkward. Ryoma even sensed some dread in his demeanor.

I see... They must have put him through the wringer.

As per Ryoma’s instructions, the Igasaki clan had threatened Douglas. Based on Douglas’s attitude right now, Ryoma assumed that they must have taken his family hostage. The Igasaki clan were ninjas, after all, and wouldn’t hesitate to resort to torture to complete their mission.

This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t gotten greedy with me.

The tactic the Igasaki ninjas had used wasn’t a peaceful way of getting things done. To Ryoma, it was outright vile. Even so, it was extremely effective on greedy people like Douglas, so they’d had no choice but to employ this method. Those types of people were extremely callous toward their peers, frighteningly so, and they were arrogant and merciless to those weaker than them. On the other hand, they were often extremely fearful and easily swayed by the threat of bodily harm to themselves or their families.

Besides, given Douglas’s attitude, it was clear that he was on the enemy’s side. The idea of coercing people who were only going about their duties made Ryoma pause, but hesitating to strike at your enemy by hurting their families was both foolish and hypocritical.

You just gotta know where to draw the line.

Using assassination and blackmail to solve an issue might have been effective, but neither were easy to carry out. Actually, it was much like modern medicine. Assassination and blackmail were akin to cutting out the disease’s source and stitching up the wound, whereas medication was a different method.

Medication was, in most cases, more appropriate and safer. By comparison, surgery was much riskier, but avoiding going under the knife wasn't always the right decision. The objective of medicine was to save lives, and both surgery and medication were viable options.

The same could be said of assassination and extortion, but one still had to be careful. When those methods worked, people tended to cling to them, and once they'd crossed a certain threshold, they found it hard to choose any other option. More than anything, choosing such violent means lowered one's quality as a human being and created friction between oneself and those around them. Not many people could make these calm distinctions like Ryoma could. If nothing else, he didn't want rumors to start circulating about him resorting to such methods.

When all is said and done, it will come down to who I am as a human being.

Could he act without regard for good or evil? Ryoma believed that a ruler's true worth was decided by their ability to accept everything, be it good or bad.

Ryoma glanced at Douglas, who was still standing by the door, and said, "So, what brings you here, Mr. Hamilton?" He was taunting Douglas—asking if Douglas came to escort him somewhere or to kill him.

Hearing Ryoma's question, Douglas shivered. After a moment, he finally spoke, his timidity greatly contrasting with his arrogance from the day prior.

"Why...I've come to escort you, of course..."

Ryoma stood from the sofa with a smile. "I see. Well, let's get going, then."

Douglas led Ryoma through the halls of the House of Lords. The building was spacious, albeit not quite as large as the palace, so Ryoma had to walk for nearly ten minutes. The whole time, Douglas kept sneaking glances at him, which made Ryoma feel awkward.

Douglas's behavior made sense, all in all. With the Igasaki clan holding his family hostage, he was probably beside himself with anxiety. He'd returned last night to an empty home, with nothing but a letter informing him of what had happened. His heart was probably full of doubts. Who took his family? Why? And right now, he was staring at the person with the most probable cause to do

something like that.

Ryoma figured that had it not been for the knights accompanying him, Douglas would have lunged at him by now. In Douglas's eyes, Ryoma was a demon or a devil, yet Douglas never paused to ask himself why this was happening to him.

The letter should have specified that nothing will happen so long as he does his job properly, but judging by the way he keeps glancing at me, he probably has an idea who orchestrated this.

Douglas's gaze momentarily met Ryoma's, at which point Douglas looked away in a hurry. Ryoma sighed.

Look, I get how you feel, but can't you trust me a little? God. I mean, my classmates knew me as someone with whom you could talk things out.

There was no guarantee that if Douglas followed the letter's instructions, his family would be returned to him. Even if there was, it was doubtful he would believe it anyway.

Ryoma wasn't one to renege on a promise, though. He might have resorted to the same means, but he wasn't a heartless monster like General Albrecht, who'd abducted Helena's daughter, only to go back on his word and sell her off to a slave merchant. Of course, since no verbal agreement had been made, Ryoma could be flexible with how he held up his side—he could capitalize on the gray zone between black and white, as it were. There was no guarantee he wouldn't end up edging toward the black, regardless of whether it was a verbal promise or a ransom note like this time.

It was no different from a kidnapper or an organized criminal choosing to actually release their hostages once they received the ransom. Although many kidnappers killed their hostages after they got their ransom, abductions could happen for reasons other than strictly money. At the same time, there were plenty of cases where, as long as the ransom was paid and law enforcement wasn't called in, the hostages were returned safely.

In the end, what determined such outcomes was whether the kidnappers were professional criminals or amateurs. Professional criminals never went back on their promises. They knew that sticking to one's word was the

strongest foundation for human relations. In a world of outlaws, this kind of trust and honor was the sole guarantee one had, and criminals only associated with those who shared their sense of pride and honor. Faith and trust had to be mutual, after all. Anyone who didn't understand that was bound for an early grave—both themselves and their families.

In that regard, Douglas was lucky. His frivolous attitude had incurred Ryoma's wrath, but he still had a chance to save his family.

Grandpa always used to say that it only takes a second to lose trust, but building it takes a long time. At the time, I thought he was just spitting out annoying platitudes.

Just about any Japanese person had heard that saying from their parents, and indeed, it was most important to interpersonal relations. As the old saying went, one couldn't live on their own, so trust and reliability were imperative for living with others.

Reliability was a combination of one's past actions and achievements, and trust was a future prediction based on one's reliability. To that end, Ryoma would never trust Lupis Rhoadserians again because she'd used her authority to go back on her word.

I will use him to my ends, anyway.

Ryoma walked on, a wicked smile on his lips, and soon Douglas stopped before a large door. It seemed they'd reached the room where the hearing would take place. Based on the decorations on the door and the guards standing on both sides of it, there was no doubting that this was the place.

Douglas nodded briefly, and the knights pushed the door open.

I'll leave him to the Igasaki clan. I've got my own job to do here.

Douglas looked like he wanted to say something, but Ryoma simply glanced at him as he passed through the door.

Inside was a spacious room so large that Ryoma honestly thought it looked like a courtroom. Ryoma had no way of knowing this, but it was the Supreme Courtroom, where just yesterday Robert and the other witnesses had been locked in verbal warfare with the House of Lords. In Japan, hearings were held

in special hearing rooms, but it seemed that wasn't the case in Rhoadseria.

"Baron Mikoshiba, please come this way," said one of the knights lined up by the wall as he motioned for Ryoma to go ahead.

Ryoma moved according to his directions, swiftly glancing around the courtroom.

Yeah, looks like they're very wary of me. I guess it makes sense a trial at a courthouse would have heavy security, but from a cursory look, there's about forty or fifty guards here.

The House of Lords was a key part of the kingdom's government, so it was expected that their courtrooms be manned with guards, but this time, the sheer number of them struck Ryoma as excessive.

"Please stand here."

The spot the guard indicated was a platform set in the very center of the room. Before it was a small podium, perhaps for placing documents. It looked no different from a courtroom in Ryoma's world.

Except there's no seat. Dammit, my legs are gonna get swollen from standing up for too long, aren't they?

Ryoma wasn't sure if this was another show of harassment, or if he was just stupid for expecting that kind of foresight from these people. Either way, he'd have to spend the duration of the hearing standing.

Sighing, Ryoma walked to the platform, and the sound of a gavel beating against wood filled the courtroom. Twenty nobles sat before Ryoma. One of them, whose seat was more elevated than the others, began speaking.

"Now then, let us begin the hearing."

They had no intention, it seemed, of apologizing for keeping Ryoma locked up in a suffocating room for the night. The man's tone had indicated that he lorded it over others and saw it as his lot in life to order people around.

He is a key figure in the nobles' faction, though. No noble in this country isn't familiar with him.

The man was unpleasant, yes, but Ryoma couldn't deny Marquis Halcyon's

authority. He was part of the nobles' faction, the largest faction within the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, headed by the former Duke Gelhart and made up of Rhoadseria's nobles. Though it was called the "nobles' faction," it wasn't quite so monolithic. For example, some nobles were more concerned with their domain's prosperity, while others focused on power struggles within the palace rather than their fiefdoms' well-being. Nobles positioned closer to the border prioritized military affairs.

Among the members of the nobles' faction, Marquis Halcyon served as the leader of the bureaucrats, those who were charged with matters of the state, and his influence was extraordinary. The House of Lords dealt with and punished those with noble titles; it was, for all intents and purposes, a courthouse reserved for the aristocracy.

Rhoadseria was a monarchy where the sovereign—Queen Lupis—held absolute authority. She had power over all matters of justice, legislation, and administration. Nonetheless, even if she had the right to decide on those matters, she couldn't possibly handle the sheer workload of doing so. She had the final say, but she rarely had time for the practical work, so she had to delegate. The man in charge of those who handled the practical work for her was Marquis Halcyon—the very man sitting opposite Ryoma now with an arrogant smile on his lips.

Let's see what the marquis is planning, then. Let's fire the first shot and see how it goes.

Ryoma took a deep breath and then began to speak.

Chapter 2: Verbal Dogfight

“Before we begin the hearing, I’d like to take this opportunity to apologize for the unfortunate misunderstanding that took place between my fiefdom and the Salzberg county, as well as for any trouble it might have caused you. I cannot begin to express the deep shame and regret I feel over this affair.”

Ryoma spoke with an austere tone. He placed his left hand over his navel and his right behind his waist and bent forward. This was the style of bowing customary among Rhoadseria’s court. He performed the gesture perfectly, and coupled with his dignified air unique to warriors, it made for one striking show.

It was an admirable display, to be sure, but it didn’t change how the nobles felt about Ryoma. Or rather, it did, but for the worse. Their glares, which were dripping with enmity, made way for expressions of scorn and glee. To them, it must have looked like the pretentious upstart was startled by being summoned to the House of Lords and was groveling before them. Yet rather than praise him for approaching this so admirably, they criticized him for taking too long to act repentant.

Of course, Ryoma wasn’t groveling before the nobles. He straightened his back and turned to look at Count Eisenbach, who sat at Marquis Halcyon’s side.

“I would also like to apologize to Count Eisenbach specifically,” Ryoma added. “You are vice director of the House of Lords, the body that stands as the authority of our kingdom, yet I am encroaching on your precious time.”

The instant Ryoma said this, the air in the courtroom suddenly became tense. Ryoma’s response wasn’t discourteous or impolite, and as the one undergoing this hearing, his behavior was perfectly acceptable. The problem, however, wasn’t what Ryoma said, but *who* he’d directed his apology toward.

What did he say?

Is he mad?

The stares directed at Ryoma were full of bewilderment and fear. They were

facing something utterly inexplicable. After all, Ryoma had just openly ignored Marquis Halcyon, the director of the House of Lords, and instead apologized to Count Eisenbach, the second-in-command. This was tantamount to ignoring the president and instead bowing to the vice president.

It was actually possible that one might mistake Count Eisenbach for Marquis Halcyon. This world didn't have photographs, so it was rare to know what someone looked like without meeting them in the flesh. The only real way to do so was by studying portraits drawn by an artist, but no matter how good a painting might be, it wasn't a photograph. The artist could have ended up changing details. Therefore, someone could mistake one man they never met for another, no matter how cautious they were.

Ryoma, on the other hand, had mentioned Count Eisenbach's name and his role as vice director, which meant he wasn't making a mistake out of ignorance. That made a world of difference.

By bowing his head to me, he makes it obvious that he ignored the marquis, thought Count Eisenbach. He just made an open declaration to one of Rhoadseria's most influential nobles and the director of the House of Lords. He just told Marquis Halcyon that he has no interest and sees no value in him.

Seeing Ryoma bow his head to him, Count Eisenbach instantly guessed Ryoma's intentions. This was the greatest insult and provocation he could have possibly made toward Marquis Halcyon, who boasted authority and influence. No, it was more than just a provocation; it was a declaration of war. No noble would mistake Ryoma's intention.

Count Eisenbach glanced at Marquis Halcyon, who sat at his right. He could see the count's face turn red with humiliation and rage. A vein popped out on his temple, and his clenched fists were visibly shaking.

It makes sense he'd react this way. He was just openly insulted by a lowborn upstart he'd mocked before.

Nothing angered nobles more than suffering an indignity and seeing their family name tarnished. Just a noble greeting his peers in the wrong order would result in outrage and sometimes a duel. It could even lead to nobles fracturing off into cliques and factions, a possibility demonstrated by the fact that half the

cases the House of Lords dealt with began like that.

For a noble, their honor meant more than their life, and Marquis Halcyon was especially preoccupied with his family's name and status. His fiefdom wasn't very large, so he didn't have much economic or military strength. There were several nobles within the nobles' faction with larger domains, yet House Halcyon had been given the position of director of the House of Lords for many generations, granting them vast influence over the palace. Not even the monarch of the kingdom, with their absolute authority, could disregard the authority they held.

Everyone respected Marquis Halcyon. They knew to bow their heads to him, and this was something that the marquis himself took for granted. At least, he did until Ryoma Mikoshiba spoke a moment ago.

Just what raged on in Marquis Halcyon's heart? He was never a patient or a tolerant man. His performance as director of the House of Lords aside, his personality was absolutely average. He wasn't the kind of man who could shrug off a whelp insulting him like this either. Normally, he would have kicked his chair away and started shouting, yet Marquis Halcyon was able to maintain enough composure to keep his anger in check.

I'm sure he's seething on the inside, though.

Ryoma's behavior was extremely provocative, but it wouldn't benefit Marquis Halcyon to raise his voice in the middle of a hearing. While Ryoma's intent was clear, the House of Lords still had to stand on ceremony here.

It was true that Ryoma had ignored Marquis Halcyon, but he could very well claim that he didn't know the marquis was there. The marquis never introduced himself, so it would be difficult to pursue the matter any further. Marquis Halcyon couldn't blame Ryoma for this insult unless he could prove that Ryoma knew he was present beforehand.

We could fault him for not knowing such an influential noble's face, but...

Count Eisenbach glared at the man standing before them, but his smile was soft. Rhoadseria had nearly one thousand nobles of differing ranks and positions, and that number was even larger if knights were included as well. Honestly speaking, knowing every single noble by face was impossible, and they

couldn't expect Ryoma to do something they couldn't do themselves. If they tried, Ryoma could claim that Marquis Halcyon was trying to trick him. Marquis Halcyon knew this too, so he begrudgingly held his tongue.

An effective idea indeed, but no ordinary noble would ever try this. He can only do this because he's an upstart and not connected to noble society. Be that as it may, we're talking about Ryoma Mikoshiba. Surely he'd fault us if we blame him for this.

If Ryoma were to make such an accusation, it would surely impact the House of Lords' authority. And what would happen if word of this leaked to the public? Ryoma Mikoshiba was a pariah in noble society—at least, none of the nobles in this room viewed him favorably—but to the public, he was a national hero, and there was no denying his fame. Even his infamous title, the Devil of Heraklion, had by now become more awe-inspiring than terrifying. They couldn't risk the public finding out that they'd tried to cheat a hero like him.

Nothing that goes on here should ever leak to the public, but...

The only people present were the nobles affiliated with the House of Lords and the knights serving under them, so it wasn't a concern that anything would leak to the public. Still, the more one tried to cover something up, the more likely it was to leak, so they couldn't risk falling for Ryoma's taunt.

But at this rate, the marquis won't stand for this. In which case...

Marquis Halcyon himself declaring his presence in this assembly would be a bad idea. It would give the impression that, for as influential as he might be, he was a buffoon whose name was not worth remembering—a trifling man easily forgotten by others. It would be a terrible blow to his dignity.

That left only one option. Count Eisenbach's expression clouded with confusion and resignation. He'd pulled the short straw, and since Ryoma had spoken to him specifically, he was the only one who could resolve this situation. Relying on himself, Count Eisenbach slowly rose from his chair.

"Your earnest apology is touching," he said. "However, it seems you're operating under a misunderstanding, Baron Mikoshiba."

Ryoma cocked his head. "Oh. How so?"

On the surface, Ryoma was smiling pleasantly, but Count Eisenbach caught a glimpse of the emotion hiding behind his friendly expression.

Nonetheless, whatever he's plotting, I can only do what I must.

It might not have been the ideal solution, but stating the facts would be much better than keeping quiet.

"I am merely an assistant here. This hearing is managed entirely by the current director of the House of Lords, Marquis Halcyon."

Marquis Halcyon, who'd remained silent in his seat, nodded gravely and relaxed his clenched fists. Count Eisenbach's words seem to have helped him regain his composure.

Confirming this with a glance, Count Eisenbach went on the offensive. "In fact, I wonder why you were under the impression that Marquis Halcyon, the director of the House of Lords, would not be attending this hearing, Baron Mikoshiha."

The other members of the House of Lords all murmured in agreement.

"The purpose of this hearing is to offer you a chance to explain the reasons behind your recent war, which has disturbed the peace and order of the kingdom. This matter is a priority for the House of Lords, as your actions are in opposition to national law, which forbids private wars between nobles. What's more, your war cost the lives of many, including Count Salzberg and the heads and relatives of the ten houses of the north, who were charged with the defense of the northern border. Your actions will have lasting repercussions for Rhoadseria's national defense. Given the gravity of your transgressions, it is entirely possible that we may elect to strip you of your title and wipe out your house. So, considering the importance of this hearing, why would you assume that the director of the House of Lords would not be handling this matter? Surely you won't say you didn't know the importance of this occasion."

This was a vicious counterattack. There was truth to Count Eisenbach's words, but Ryoma's attitude didn't change in the slightest; he had been waiting for those very words.

"I see. So Marquis Halcyon is the one directing this hearing. And it was by his

will that I was separated from my escorts and forced to spend a full day and night in a room without windows. That's what you're saying, yes? Because, unless my memory fails me, Rhoadserian law defines a hearing as a procedure where witnesses are merely questioned in order to decide if there's need for a trial. Which means that, as a noble with a title, I ought to have been entitled to all my rights."

Ryoma hung his head morosely. He wasn't actually bemoaning what happened, but the gesture was enough to make it clear what he was getting at.

This bastard. He's trying to criticize us for treating him unfairly and throw the House of Lords' impartial neutrality into question. He's trying to say this entire hearing is a ploy to set him up.

True, Ryoma's confinement in a room no different than a cell was the handiwork of Count Eisenbach and the other nobles in attendance. They all knew it. If asked if this was the proper way to treat a noble with a title, the answer would be a resounding "no." Even if this was a trial and he was judged guilty, as a noble, he was still entitled to certain rights, as long as he wasn't sentenced to death.

One of those rights was to have his attendants with him. Despite being aware of this, the House of Lords knowingly treated Ryoma improperly. There could only be one explanation as to why they did so: as a show of enmity and antagonism toward Ryoma Mikoshiba.

We let them go ahead with this so as to keep the other nobles' disgruntlement contained, but I didn't think he'd turn it against us now.

Count Eisenbach quietly clicked his tongue. Several noble houses had blood ties with the Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north. Some were just connected by marriages from several generations ago, but given the importance of family connections within the nobility, this was close enough to blood ties. To them, Ryoma wasn't just a treasonous upstart; he was the killer of their relatives. It would have come as no surprise if their houses had pooled their soldiers together and marched on Ryoma, but doing so would have made the country's volatile internal affairs even more unstable.

For this reason, Marquis Halcyon and Count Eisenbach had decided to

suppress the nobles' wrath by offering them retribution in the form of an official hearing. This was, after all, the standard procedure for dealing with such matters.

Her Majesty greatly desired this as well, so it was only natural we would go along with her will.

Queen Lupis and the House of Lords never quite saw eye to eye, but when it came to Baron Mikoshiba, their interests were perfectly aligned. In the face of this common enemy, they were able to put aside their existing disagreements and collude together. When it came to the question of how to dispose of him, the queen stressed that they were to follow the proper procedures by the book. Since they were judging a "national hero," Queen Lupis needed to maintain her dignity in this situation.

The nobles understood this, but the human heart had a way of ignoring reason. One such example was a victim's desire to punish their assailant in ways that overstepped the boundaries of the law. That was why Count Eisenbach had looked the other way as they confined Ryoma in a filthy room in the House of Lords. He'd assumed that this was so minor an infraction that even if news of it did get out, they could come up with an excuse. Otherwise, the other nobles' tempers would be too difficult to control.

Count Eisenbach himself hadn't been inclined to offer Ryoma a comfortable stay either, so he'd just seen it as a convenient development. He certainly hadn't expected Ryoma to use it against them like this, not right after he'd explained that Marquis Halcyon was the one in charge of this hearing.

This is bad. And him suggesting that Marquis Halcyon was behind it is even worse. This could even reflect poorly on Queen Lupis...

It was evident that the House of Lords' neutrality and impartiality was an empty slogan, and everyone present knew that, but it was upheld by an unspoken understanding that they must keep up appearances. It only lasted for as long as no one spoke of it, and if anyone were to deny the idea, the thin facade of it all would crumble away.

What do we do? Just keep holding our tongues?

The nobles of the House of Lords and the knights serving them were the only

ones here, so they could just ignore Ryoma's words and carry on with the hearing. The outcome was already decided, after all. But doing so could put Marquis Halcyon and Count Eisenbach at risk later down the line. Malicious rumors could spread that the House of Lords' director tried to bend the rules to pin a crime on a national hero.

There are many nobles seeking to claim the director's seat for themselves, like Viscount Therese.

The House of Lords was an influential clique that helped form the nobles' faction, so the position of director was desirable, and many people actively pursued it. Those nobles were always looking on like vultures, waiting for Marquis Halcyon and his lackeys to make a mistake.

They couldn't even trust people within the House of Lords, who were supposedly on their side. From where the other nobles stood, Marquis Halcyon and Count Eisenbach were the leaders of the clique. While they were valuable allies, they were also obstacles that stood in the way of their personal advancement. That was even applicable to Count Eisenbach to an extent. He too wished to become the director of the House of Lords.

No, the issue right now is how to get out of this.

Several possible excuses came to mind. Count Eisenbach didn't believe he could completely talk his way out of Ryoma's question, so coming up with unpleasant excuses was necessary, yet he couldn't even manage that. He'd tried to help Marquis Halcyon, but that had only tightened the noose around him instead.

Nevertheless, it seemed the gods hadn't abandoned Count Eisenbach to his plight. One of the nobles watching on rose from his seat and spoke.

"I've heard your accusation," he said, his austere voice, full of dignity, echoing through the room, "but it strikes me as unjust suspicion on your behalf. Do you have any solid proof of this?"

The voice was brimming with confidence, its tone indicating that the owner saw it as his calling to govern people. At the same time, the voice was wise and cold, with the sharpness of a blade. Any man of average grit would have fallen silent at the sound of it.

This man was pressuring Ryoma into abandoning his argument. It wasn't a bad play, yet it hinged on Ryoma being a man of average grit.

"And you are?" Ryoma asked, his expression remaining composed as he betrayed the man's expectations.

"My apologies. I am David Hamilton, head of the Hamilton county. I serve the House of Lords as assistant to Marquis Halcyon, much like Count Eisenbach."

His tone had made it clear how proud he was of his family name. As he'd spoken, he'd puffed up his chest.

Count Hamilton, eh? Ryoma hung his head, smiling to himself. So the bailiff's family head just stepped up. I was hoping to turn the conversation over to him, so this is a fortunate development.

"I see. So it's you," Ryoma muttered.

"So you've heard of me," Count Hamilton replied.

"Yes. I've heard that you're in charge of managing the bailiffs and court attendants and that you are a leading figure within the House of Lords."

Count Hamilton must have enjoyed having his ego stroked. He seemed satisfied with Ryoma's answer and carried on.

"Good, then that makes things quick. I understand there may have been inconveniences in your reception, but I can attest that Marquis Halcyon is, by his very nature, a just and fair man."

Count Hamilton then waved his hands, as if to say that the matter was over and done. There was no logic or reason to his claim; it was an empty promise, akin to an attorney in a criminal trial promising that his client was innocent without any material evidence. This wasn't negotiation or persuasion. He'd laughed off Ryoma's claim and treated it like nonsense. From Count Hamilton's perspective, as the number three man in the House of Lords, his assertion of Marquis Halcyon's character was enough to wrap up this entire discussion.

Ryoma was momentarily speechless at Count Hamilton's attitude. For as calculating and wary as he was, he rarely had this reaction. He'd anticipated Count Hamilton's attitude, of course, but he'd also assumed that the probability

of him acting like this was low. People said that truth was stranger than fiction, and Ryoma had just experienced that firsthand.

He seriously thinks that if he hides behind his family name, I'll just settle down obediently, Ryoma thought. *That's some amazing confidence. Or, well, overconfidence, in this case. Either way, it's impressive, to be honest.*

Confidence meant that one believed in their abilities or powers or that they believed they could achieve the future they desired, and there was no room for a third party to interfere. In essence, it came down to whether one believed in oneself.

Having confidence might seem very simple and fully within one's control, but realistically speaking, it wasn't that easy. For example, anyone who went through an entrance exam knew how hard it was to be confident in one's chances. Students could study for days on end to enter their desired schools, each of them spending their time optimally to study, but they wouldn't know if their choice to work so hard would pay off until the exams concluded. After all, they all believed they'd worked their hardest, but many of them would still go to shrines, praying and buying amulets to gain divine favor. Praying for success was hardly unusual, but if they were truly confident in themselves and their efforts, they wouldn't need to rely on divine favor. Still, it was human nature to cling to something else in times of uncertainty.

Believing in yourself was easier said than done, so Count Hamilton's attitude really was strange. He honestly believed he could convince an enemy he hated to step down and change their mind through nothing but a verbal promise.

That's the kind of thing I'd never see in Japan.

Most people in the modern world would think Count Hamilton was a pompous, overconfident fool, perhaps even a madman to be avoided, but that was just how things worked in modern Japan. From what Ryoma knew, most nobles would have actually taken Count Hamilton at his word. Or, if nothing else, they wouldn't have questioned it.

Counts, depending on their influence, were either medium-or high-ranking nobles. Count Hamilton also managed the House of Lords' personnel, which granted him more military strength than most. The only people in this room

who could openly oppose Count Hamilton were his superiors, Marquis Halcyon and Count Eisenbach.

This kind of thing isn't totally impossible in Japan, but it just wouldn't be this exaggerated. I guess that's just the nobility for you.

It wasn't unusual for people to suck up to their superiors, or even change their minds based on what their superiors thought. In other words, they would infer how their superiors felt and act accordingly. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing either. If no one ever budged on their opinions, nothing would ever resolve smoothly.

Ryoma, however, saw these nobles as enemies, and no matter what they thought, he had no intention of stepping down.

"If you ask for proof, I can simply say that the bailiff works for the House of Lords—the very same bailiff who shut me inside a dark room for nearly a full day. That much is fact. Don't you think it's only natural to assume that someone from the House of Lords instructed him to do so? And earlier, Count Eisenbach attested that this hearing is managed entirely by Marquis Halcyon. Does it not make sense, then, that I would come to that conclusion?"

His attitude was bold, if not outright brazen, but to these nobles who loathed him, seeing him act so collected and unperturbed was more irritating than anything. This was like watching a low-grade employee argue with a company's president. Obviously a whelp who didn't know his place would buy their ire, but Ryoma was well aware of what he was doing.

"Like I said, this is an unjust suspicion on your be—" Count Hamilton started, but this time, the dignity and confidence in his voice seemed somewhat shaken. He hadn't expected Ryoma to argue back so directly.

"And if I recall, the bailiff who showed me in was also called Hamilton...which gives me the impression that he might be related to you. Could it be...?"

With these words, Ryoma had turned his criticism from Marquis Halcyon to Count Hamilton, and though he'd trailed off, the intent behind his words was clear. A heavy silence settled over the room.

Count Hamilton had just tried to help his colleagues but had brought the

blame on himself instead. He racked his brains for a way out of this. Ryoma wasn't kind enough to let his enemy's moment of weakness pass by without capitalizing on it, though.

"I think that I'm going to have to start questioning whether this court is as impartial as it claims to be..."

Ryoma shrugged dramatically and shook his head, but no one dared blame him for the impolite gesture. They couldn't; Ryoma's doubt was reasonable. No one present held any delusions that this was a fair trial—neither Ryoma, who was the one being subjected to this hearing, nor the House of Lords, who were holding it. Nevertheless, the House of Lords couldn't let it be known that this trial wasn't impartial and fair, because they wanted to use it as an opportunity to attack a whelp they disliked.

Eventually, Marquis Halcyon broke his silence with a sigh. He looked Ryoma in the eyes and said, "Very well. Though unintentional, I will admit our hospitality was lacking. Your misgivings are understandable, Baron Mikoshiba."

The other nobles began murmuring among themselves. The director of the House of Lords had acknowledged that their treatment of Ryoma, albeit unintentional, was improper. Considering the difference in their ranks, a marquis apologizing to a baron was unimaginable.

Marquis Halcyon carried on, disregarding the nobles' whispering. "Now then, what can we do to alleviate your misgivings?"

The director of the House of Lords was raising the white flag to Ryoma Mikoshiba, which was exactly what Ryoma wanted.

"That's a good question. In that case..."

After a moment's contemplation, Ryoma uttered his demand to Marquis Halcyon.



Douglas Hamilton dragged his legs along with a heavy, melancholic air. His steps had no power. He was hunched over, and his head was hanging low, like a prisoner climbing the steps to the gallows. As his footsteps echoed loudly through the stone corridor, there wasn't a hint of the arrogance he'd displayed

the day prior.

Everything looks the same as ever, but something is obviously different.

Lights lined both sides of the corridor, and armed guards stood in set intervals between each other. As a member of House Hamilton in service to the House of Lords and a bailiff, Douglas had seen this sight every day for over ten years, but something critical was missing today.



Is this what this hall looked like to all the prisoners I brought here?

Something dark and oppressive had bound Douglas's heart. Up until now, he'd walked this corridor as a bailiff leading convicts to their destination, but now he was the one being led along. Douglas was shocked to realize how much a change in one's position could alter a familiar sight.

As a distant relative of Count Hamilton, who was in charge of the House of Lords' staff, Douglas was someone to whom others had to bow. Or at least he was until just an hour ago, when all that had changed.

Why? Why did this happen? All I did was obey the count's instructions. Everyone else knows it too, so why?

Douglas continued to drag his feet, following the bailiff who was once his colleague. Nothing he could say now would change things. If words could fix this, he wouldn't have been in this position to begin with. After all, Douglas was a member of House Hamilton, a family whose authority over the House of Lords was second only to Marquis Halcyon himself.

That said, Douglas was a distant relative; he wasn't a member of the head house. He had a claim to the headship, but his chances of inheriting the title were close to nil. Even so, as a blood relative of the count, he'd received the favor of many people in service to the House of Lords. That favor had its limits, though, and it didn't give him license to do whatever he pleased.

Unlike other bailiffs, Douglas was often allotted manageable, docile defendants and prisoners, so he rarely ran into unexpected situations, and he was often accompanied by more knights and guards than necessary. When he demanded bribes, everyone else in the House of Lords' employ looked the other way. As greedy as Douglas was, he was good at his job, and the people he demanded bribes from were usually defendants in very weak positions. So while some might have frowned upon his actions, nothing was ever said. He very much ruled the place. His relation, although distant, to a man in power ensured his success, but at some point, Douglas's reign seemed to have ended, turning into an age of decline.

The bailiff and Douglas arrived at a room in a corner of the House of Lords.

“Excuse me,” the bailiff said courteously as he knocked on the door. “I’ve brought the man you asked for, as per the director’s instructions.”

His call was answered immediately, implying that the people inside had been waiting for them.

“Good. Come in,” replied a voice as clear as a bell.

A girl with waist-length silver hair wearing a maid’s outfit beckoned them inside. Her face confirmed Douglas’s greatest fears.

It’s like I thought. But why? Why is this happening?!

On the way here, Douglas had vaguely suspected that this might be what was going on. There was no other probable cause that could have brought this on—nothing but his arrival yesterday at Count Salzberg’s estate to pick up Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba.

“I will be off, then.” The bailiff bowed, having handed custody of Douglas over to the silver-haired girl, and left the room. It was evident that the bailiff hadn’t wanted to linger even a second longer than he absolutely had to. From his perspective, he’d just thrown Douglas into shark-infested waters, and his guilt kept him from watching the atrocity that would follow, even though he didn’t much care for Douglas and his greedy, arrogant ways. Perhaps deep down the bailiff was gleeful about this, but that depended on Douglas’s past behavior.

The maid led Douglas into the room, where he stood before a man seated on a sofa—the room’s owner, Ryoma Mikoshiba. Douglas shivered, likely out of fear.

“Master Ryoma, they’ve brought him,” another girl whispered to Ryoma, whose eyes were closed in thought. She had the same facial features as the girl who’d opened the door, but her hair was a golden color.

Ryoma nodded and slowly rose from the sofa, smiling broadly at Douglas.

“We meet again,” he said, “Mr. Hamilton the bailiff. Well, you’re not a bailiff anymore, are you? And if I just called you by your last name, it might sound like I’m addressing Count Hamilton. But Douglas is fine, right?”

Ryoma gestured for Douglas to take a seat on the sofa. There was no enmity

in his gesture, nor any sense of superiority based on how their positions had flipped in a day. It was just an ordinary gesture. However, Ryoma's innocuous behavior made Douglas feel like he was about to lie on a bed of thorns. He was prepared to be shouted at and threatened, but he had no idea what to expect from this.

Douglas took a seat on the sofa, visibly frightened. Ryoma leaned over and poured some water into a glass for him.

"I'd usually serve a guest liquor, but sadly this is all we have here," Ryoma said, placing the glass before Douglas.

The glass was full of a transparent fluid. If Ryoma was to be believed, it was just water. And it probably was, if only because they weren't in Ryoma's domain or at Count Salzberg's estate. They were in the House of Lords, a stronghold managed by Rhoadseria's nobles. Expecting any proper hospitality from Ryoma when he came here to be questioned would be excessive, but that wasn't what made Douglas pause.

Ice? And so much of it...

This world had no electrical appliances like refrigerators, so ice was precious and rare. It wasn't unobtainable, but it wasn't readily available either. One could store it in an ice room during the winter, or go to a mountain covered in perpetual snow. Or one could create ice using thaumaturgy and sell it for money. But even if one could store ice somewhere or collect it from a mountain, transporting it cost time and man power.

In both cases, traveling to a remote area came with the risk of being attacked by monsters, so one had to be able to repel the monsters. Plus, the deeper you went into the mountains, the less the trails were maintained, which ruled out traveling by carriage. One had to leave their carriage at the foot of the mountain and carry the ice along the mountain trail. It all resulted in absurd costs in man power, so the price of delivering ice was high. It was so costly that some adventurers specialized in delivering ice, and many of the upper classes paid for it, seeking to chill themselves during the sweltering summer.

More specifically, those who were wealthy but not powerful paid for ice to be delivered. The true upper classes hired verbal thaumaturgists. To them, rather

than going to the guild to obtain ice, they could ask the thaumaturgists they'd already hired as teachers or guards to do it, which was both safer and quicker.

Ice made with verbal thaumaturgy had no impurities in it, and the caster could manipulate the size of it and the amount they produced. In addition, most thaumaturgists would cast the spell in front of their clients, eliminating the possibility of poisoning, which worried many people in the upper classes. It wasn't a perfect countermeasure to the threat of assassination, but most powerful nobles saw it as a way to reduce the chances of it.

What troubled Douglas was the fact that his glass of water had such precious ice in it. He wasn't sure what to make of it.

What is going on? Is there some kind of catch to this?

Honestly speaking, Douglas wasn't under the impression that Ryoma liked him whatsoever. It was much more likely that Ryoma loathed him. After all, Douglas had taken his money under the table but hadn't shown him any preferential treatment, instead locking him in a small, windowless room for a whole night. Douglas didn't do that of his own accord—he'd only carried out Count Hamilton's instructions—but he knew that wasn't going to help him any.

Besides, isn't he the one who abducted my family?

That doubt hung heavily over Douglas. There was no proof implicating Ryoma of kidnapping, but given the situation, Ryoma had the most reason to hold a grudge and act out against Douglas, so it was hard to believe Ryoma was unrelated to this. The letter did mention that as long as he followed their instructions, his family would be unharmed, but Douglas wasn't oblivious enough to blindly believe a verbal promise from criminals. The instructions they mentioned hadn't reached him yet, so he had nothing to follow anyway.

"Here you go. Take a breather for the time being," Ryoma said.

Ryoma urged Douglas to drink, so Douglas carefully reached for the glass. After steeling himself, he brought it to his lips...only to be surprised.

"This is...fruit water?" he asked.

A refreshing, fruity aroma filled his nostrils. The mild sourness of citrus fruit and the sweetness of apple relaxed Douglas's heart. More than anything, the

fragrant grasslike aroma made all the tension drain from his body. The flavor made him want to sigh in relief.

“Before we get down to business, allow me to greet you,” Ryoma said, settling his gaze on Douglas. “I’m Ryoma Mikoshiba. I have been granted the title of baron in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. I govern the Wortenia Peninsula and have placed the northern regions under my control. That’s all the official titles, but, well, you knew all that.” Ryoma then shrugged, his expression somewhat sheepish.

All of this struck Douglas as rather out of place, so his discomfort was understandable. Just a few days ago, Douglas had arrived at Count Salzberg’s villa, where Ryoma was staying, meaning he knew perfectly well who Ryoma was. While Ryoma was technically a minor aristocrat, he was still a noble with a title, so one couldn’t just ignore him.

“Aah... I-I am Douglas Hamilton,” Douglas muttered in response, stumbling over his words. “A distant relative of Count Hamilton. Allow me to apologize for what happened yesterday. I hope our relations can be cordial in the future, Baron Mikoshiba...sir.”

Under normal circumstances, this exchange would have been impolite. It was different in Ryoma’s world, but in Rhoadseria and other countries in this world, those from a lower class introduced themselves to those of a higher station first. Even in modern society, which didn’t have a strict class system, there was a pecking order based on age and social position—full-time employees and part-time ones, parents and children, teachers and students. Human interactions were made up of a complex web of such relationships.

In modern society, being late to introduce oneself to someone higher didn’t cost one their life. At most, it would spark gossip that the person had no common sense. In this world, however, with its class system and Rhoadseria’s particularly severe rules for how nobles were treated, it could be a matter of life and death. One could be executed for insolence, depending on circumstances.

Of course, this time, Ryoma addressed Douglas first, so this was an exception. Furthermore, this was the House of Lords, and while Douglas wasn’t a noble

with a title, he wasn't a commoner either, so such matters could be overlooked. Still, it would make sense for Douglas to bow his head and pay his respects.

Douglas knew all this too. As a distant relative of Count Hamilton, he'd been thoroughly educated in manners and etiquette from youth, so normally this exchange would have gone smoothly and elegantly. But given the situation, he wasn't in the state of mind to do so. His position was much different from what it was just yesterday, and now Ryoma was the winner and he was the loser. Douglas wouldn't have been escorted to this room otherwise.

Ryoma's attitude, on the other hand, didn't give that impression at all, and Douglas had no idea how he should act. He felt like he was being tortured.

Meanwhile, Ryoma regarded Douglas with a smile—not because he was exceptionally magnanimous toward him, but because he couldn't care less how Douglas felt. Ryoma had only called for Douglas because he needed Douglas to do something for him.

But the way things are going, we'll be getting nowhere... Ryoma thought.

Ryoma cared little about Douglas himself, and he wasn't targeting him because of a grudge or any particular dislike. He simply needed the right tool to ensure that his next plot succeeded, and Douglas, who'd accepted Ryoma's money but hadn't helped him at all, was the perfect candidate. Plus, Douglas's abducted family acted as insurance.

In the end, since Douglas had taken Ryoma's money, he had to pay the price. Most people would be upset if they received nothing after offering such a sum. It was unfortunate that Douglas had no choice, and he was to be pitied, but since he'd already accepted Ryoma's bribe, he was perhaps getting his just deserts.

Nonetheless, they had to get to the main topic, or else this meeting would be a waste of time. One needed to tend to their tools if they wanted them to be effective, and Ryoma knew this very well.

"Now, now, calm down a little. I'm not going to pluck you and eat you, you know? Just drink some water, okay?" Ryoma said, trying to calm Douglas as he looked around nervously.

Douglas shivered at the sound of Ryoma's voice, but he did seem to relax a little after that. Or maybe he merely resigned himself to whatever might come. Whichever it was, he picked up the glass and downed its contents.

"Yes, thank you. So why did you call for me, sir?" Douglas asked.

Ryoma nodded, satisfied. "Actually, I wanted to ask you to handle a little task for me."

"A...task?"

Douglas felt intense chills wash over him. He was getting a bad feeling about what was coming next. There was no basis or reason for this premonition; it was just a gut feeling that was as likely to be true as it was to be off the mark. Except this time, Douglas was almost sure it was accurate.

"I call it a task, but it's really nothing big. Though it is a bit dangerous, I'll admit," Ryoma continued.

The implication behind Ryoma's words was clear, and Douglas wasn't nearly foolish enough to miss their nuance. After being called here like this, Douglas wouldn't believe it was just a small task.

"And that would be?" Douglas asked, his eyes full of suspicion and distrust.

No one would blindly agree to this. In any other situation, Douglas would have kicked the chair away and stormed out of the room. The fact that he hadn't done so meant he knew his place in this situation.

There were two reasons Douglas couldn't leave. The first was that his own colleagues had brought him to this room, and the second was that Ryoma was probably involved in his family's sudden disappearance.

Ryoma was well aware that Douglas suspected him too.

I shouldn't toy with him too much, though. Let's cut to the chase.

"It really is nothing too big," Ryoma said. "I want you to use your authority to open the door leading to the underground passage. That's all."

Curious, Douglas cocked his head. "The underground passage? You mean the evacuation passage meant for emergencies?"

Ryoma nodded. “Yes, that one.”

Douglas fell silent, staring fixedly at the young noble seated before him. The door leading to the underground passage was usually locked tight. It was forbidden to open it, and no one in recent memory had ever used it. In fact, very few people even knew it existed.

The only ones who knew of this door were the guards charged with protecting it and some of the House of Lords’ most influential members. Douglas only knew of it because Count Hamilton had ordered him to be prepared to unlock it if the need arose. He had a general knowledge of what was behind it, but he’d never actually stepped inside. This was because the underground passage was an evacuation path leading out of the House of Lords, under the castle gates, and all the way outside the capital.

And this man knows about it? Most members of the House of Lords don’t even know of it. He’s well prepared... Douglas thought.

Douglas’s bad feeling was growing ever grimmer. He was beginning to piece together why Ryoma Mikoshiba had called for him.

The door to the underground passage was small and inconspicuous, so as to not draw attention, and the area around it was forbidden at most times. Only a few guards watched over the door, but in exchange, they were some of the most skilled guards in the House of Lords’ employ. Forcing one’s way through them would be difficult, and if anyone were to try, the House of Lords’ knights would immediately notice the disturbance and hurry over to help. Therefore, the safest way to get through this door would be to go through the official procedures of unlocking it.

But those procedures are quite rigid. If I recall correctly, it requires a decree from the director, Marquis Halcyon...

A secret passage leading outside the capital was a security liability, so the procedures to open the door were complex. Even so, Douglas knew this was all pretense; if a powerful enough member of the House of Lords or their relative were to order it, the passage could be unlocked with ease. And as a relative of Count Hamilton, the number three member of the House of Lords, Douglas could possibly apply enough pressure to make it happen.

If it's just ensuring the door is opened, I could do that. At least, until now, I could just go and tell the guards that Count Hamilton ordered that the door be opened, but...

But the problem was that Douglas's current position wasn't the same as it was just yesterday. One day earlier and he could have thrown around his authority, but now that his fellow bailiffs had brought him here like a prisoner, it was doubtful if he had much influence left.

And what is he intending to do after I open the door? I shudder to even consider this, but...

The most plausible scenario was that Ryoma was planning to escape the House of Lords, but although that was likely, it felt altogether meaningless.

Assuming he escapes the capital safely, what then? Is he just going to hole himself up in Wortenia?

Ryoma had overcome Count Salzberg in the previous war, placing northern Rhoadseria under his rule in the process, but that was only temporary. Surely the commoners wouldn't view this new governor who cast them into war favorably. If Ryoma did hide in his territory, a subjugation army under the royal house's banner would march on his lands and no doubt sway the hearts of the commoners away from Ryoma's side. Even if Ryoma escaped, there were only two options left to him: surrender or suicide.

Or maybe, being the commoner that he is, he would pathetically throw it all away and flee the country.

If Ryoma tried to escape the House of Lords at this point, he would have no future. Douglas couldn't see this ending any other way.

In spite of Douglas's doubts, Ryoma maintained a composed smile as he asked, "What do you say, Mr. Douglas? Do you accept?"

"Am I allowed to refuse?" Douglas asked with a self-deprecating smile.

"I'm not twisting your arm." Ryoma shrugged, but the smile vanished from his lips. He leveled his gaze at Douglas, his eyes cold. "But if you don't undertake this request, you'll be forfeiting your reward. And unlike you, I don't renege on a promise, even if it is just a verbal one. As proof, I'll give you this."

Laura, who was standing behind Ryoma, picked up a wooden box and placed it on the table. She then slowly opened the lid.

The moment Douglas saw its contents, all became clear to him. This boy, whom he'd mocked as a lowborn commoner until now, had just bared his fangs at him, and their length and sharpness sent shivers down Douglas's spine.

Sitting inside the box were a ring and a hairpin, both of which were familiar to Douglas. No, they were more than just familiar. The ring was the wedding ring he'd given to his wife, and the hairpin was a birthday present he'd given his daughter.

My wife would never take off her ring, and my girl cherished this hairpiece.
No!

Douglas's expression contorted into a grimace as the worst-case scenario crossed his mind. Yet, upon closer inspection, the ring and hairpiece were clean and untouched, just like he remembered them. There wasn't a drop of blood on them. This implied that his wife and daughter hadn't been taken by force. That wasn't of much solace to him, though, because Douglas wasn't nearly foolish enough to miss the meaning of all this.

A long silence hung over them, until eventually, Douglas spoke.

"I see. So these are your methods..." Douglas said, his hands shaking. His heart sizzled with anger and hatred toward the man sitting calmly before him. How satisfying it would be to let out his emotions and slam his fists into this terrible man's face.

His was the righteous anger of a man whose family had been taken hostage, but none of the gazes in the room fixed on Douglas had an ounce of pity in them—only scorn and enmity. To those in Ryoma's service, Douglas had disrespected and insulted their lord.

"Why did you do this?" Douglas murmured, his head hung and his fists clenched on his lap. He was shivering with suppressed rage. "True, I didn't help you even though I took your money, but...my wife and my daughter are innocent. They have nothing to do with this, do they?"

Douglas was in a truly pitiful state, but Ryoma Mikoshiba wasn't naive enough

to let his heart be swayed by such cheap theater.

“I was under the impression that, in this world, the debts of a parent are passed down to their children,” Ryoma stated. “I could be mistaken, but isn’t that how you’ve lived your life so far? And the rules aren’t going to bend just because you’re on the receiving end of that for once, no matter how inconvenient it might be for you. Isn’t that right, Mr. Douglas Hamilton?”

“Th-That’s...” Douglas stumbled over his words.

It was quite common in noble society for the sins of a parent to be passed down to their children. As a member of the House of Lords, Douglas had escorted to the gallows several people who were paying for their relative’s crimes. Most of them were young men or elderly people, but some of them were children—toddlers still not out of their diapers. He didn’t enjoy sentencing them to death, and if he could have shirked this duty, he would have. The sight of mothers begging for their child’s life tugged at his conscience and weighed on his heart.

The bailiffs often foisted the job of manning the gallows onto each other. Douglas wasn’t a man without emotion, but the fact remained that he’d been complicit in forcing children to repay their parents’ debts and crimes.

This man...

Douglas understood perfectly well what the baron sitting before him with a composed, calculated smile was getting at. The crimes of the accused were paid by their families.

Modern society stressed individual rights over filial relations, so it had greatly improved on this concept. For example, debts were meant to be repaid by the one who took the loan, but since ancient days, debts had been passed on from parent to child. It was a child’s duty to repay what their parents owed. Many historical dramas drew on this idea as inspiration, often including plots with a daughter or wife being sent as collateral for a man’s loan, which wasn’t an entirely fictional idea.

This wasn’t limited to debts either. Favors and revenge were also subject to this logic. It wasn’t unheard of for one to repay a debt of gratitude to the child of their benefactor, especially among those who knew the battlefield. The same

applied to revenge. Plenty of stories told of avengers who, upon learning that their nemeses had died, had turned their blades to their enemies' children. Unlike most stories, such cases rarely devolved into life and death, but every now and then, people were lured by the sweet temptation of revenge, most often when there was a large difference in class between the avenger and the target.

What's more, before modern times, there was a belief called guilt by association, wherein blood relatives were complicit in a person's crimes, so a parent's wrongdoings could result in the exile or execution of a child and vice versa. Some modern societies still followed this reasoning. For instance, when it came to Japan's Public Office Election Law, guilt by association still applied. Even if a candidate wasn't directly involved with a crime, if their secretary or blood relatives had taken bribes or committed an election offense, the candidate might have to withdraw, and they'd be forbidden from being a candidate for a certain number of years.

This was unreasonable in modern society, but if one were to think of punishment as a deterrent, this was an effective method—especially for people who cherished their family and friends' well-being more than their own. And Douglas deeply cared for his wife and child.

"This being the case, can we count on your cooperation?" Ryoma prodded. "Don't worry. We'll send a person to give you the right time to open the door. You don't have to hesitate at all."

Douglas sighed. He was powerless and couldn't possibly refuse.

"All right, I think that was the final tweak the plan needed," Ryoma whispered as he watched Douglas shuffle out of the room with his shoulders drooping.

Laura, who stood behind him, replied immediately. "Yes, from watching his reactions, I doubt he'd betray us."

"I think so too," Sara said, "but he's betrayed us once already. We should keep a close eye on him to make sure he doesn't do it again. It'll keep us safe from any unexpected developments too."

Even if Douglas didn't intentionally betray them, his behavior and attitude could tip off his colleagues. For that reason, leaving Douglas unattended was

risky.

“Yeah, agreed. Let’s have some of the Igasaki ninjas that infiltrated the place follow him,” Ryoma concluded.

Hearing those words, a knight standing by the wall, who was clad in the House of Lords’ armor, nodded and followed Douglas out of the room. As Ryoma watched him leave, he thought of the tasks ahead of him.

The Igasaki ninjas... They’re a godsend in these kinds of situations. But the issue is that in this world, there’s no saying that other people aren’t aware of ninja tactics.

Even though ninjas weren’t an established school in this world, other groups could be using similar methods. Spies, information brokers, and assassins all employed comparable techniques, and adventurers incorporated such concepts as they explored forests and the like. Indeed, some adventurers went on to become spies for major nobles after they retired from adventuring. These nobles hesitated to give knights or squires from dignified families such dirty work, so adventurers turned spies were much easier to use; they weren’t weighed down by pride or a sense of duty, they wanted only money for compensation, and they knew the way the world worked.

Among the countries in the western continent, some took in children and raised them to be spies, which went to show the lengths people would go to get their hands on dependable operatives. The information they handled could shake the foundations of entire countries, after all, so while their skill was important, trustworthiness was far more crucial.

In that regard, getting to know Gennou and Sakuya during Rhoadseria’s civil war and bringing the Igasaki clan under his employ was a stroke of luck for Ryoma. But it also meant he had to be wary of the possibility that future enemies might also have a network of spies like the Igasaki clan. If that were to happen, counterintelligence would become paramount.

Information security...

This was a fairly new concept in modern society, mostly used by IT companies, but at its core it described a thesis that had been in use for ages. The concepts of espionage and counterintelligence had lurked in the shadows of war for as

long as war had existed.

The opposition's lack of brains this time does work in my favor, though.

The Igasaki ninjas he'd sent to infiltrate this place were skilled, but more importantly, the House of Lords had barely any counterintelligence measures in place. With everyone wearing helmets that covered their entire face, it was difficult to distinguish who you were talking to, and even if that wasn't the case, there were nearly a thousand people working in the House of Lords—even more if one counted the errand boys handling the chores. Identifying each and every person in the building was hard enough, so stopping a hostile third party from infiltrating their ranks was even harder.

On the other hand, since Ryoma had beaten Count Salzberg and expanded his domain to include the northern regions, completely fending off enemy spies would become difficult. Ryoma had all sorts of countermeasures in place to prevent that, but the fact that the Igasaki clan could infiltrate the House of Lords—which was a part of the palace—with such ease was both a favorable outcome for Ryoma and a potential problem.

“When we get back to Sirius, I'll have to talk things over with Gennou again,” Ryoma whispered to himself as he rose from the sofa. He then looked to Laura, having recalled something. “Right, I almost forgot to ask. What did Dilphina say about the illness?”

Laura's answer was severe.



Several hours had passed since Douglas Hamilton left the room. Ryoma was seated on the sofa, relishing the aroma of his Qwiltantian tea. He looked at the clock sitting on the table, its hands indicating it was almost one in the afternoon.

After his verbal dogfight that morning with Count Halcyon and the upper echelon of the House of Lords, Ryoma had gained a temporary recess in the hearing, but once the clock struck one, the cease-fire would end.

Just a little longer, and this farce will finally be over.

Ryoma scoffed as the time for the hearing's continuation approached.

However, he wasn't worried by the prospect of once again having to fight them in a battle of words. In the several hours since Douglas had left, Ryoma had remained shut in this room. He wasn't displeased by that, though, since he knew it was necessary. Still, even though waiting was part of his plan, it didn't necessarily put him in a good mood. It wasn't a waste of time, but it did feel like time spent doing nothing. Ryoma was a busy man; being a governor was by no means an easy job. Military affairs, internal affairs, diplomacy—all these matters were decided by his skill.

Of course, some nobles resorted to heavy taxation and forced their underlings to manage all their practical duties while they enjoyed comfort and pleasures, but governors like that weren't fated to live long. A rebellion would break out that would destroy their bloodlines, or their family or vassals would plot against them, resulting in their death from illness or an unfortunate accident.

Count Salzberg had spent years living a life of debauchery, but he'd been able to afford it thanks to his transcendent skills as a warrior, his glory and accomplishments, and Lady Yulia's talents in governing in his stead. He was very much an exception to the rule. No noble with any average sense of responsibility or affection for their domain would act so irresponsibly.

What's more, the domain Ryoma gained following his last war was vast, especially since most of the ten houses that governed northern Rhoadseria had been destroyed. In terms of surface area, these lands were less than a fourth of the size of the Wortenia Peninsula, but in conquering the north, Ryoma had gained borders with the neighboring kingdoms of Xarooda and Myest. Plus, these domains were populated by citizens. Unlike his peninsula, which was mostly an undeveloped, unpopulated land, this land required him to deal with certain aspects that he hadn't needed to before. With all these details, Ryoma's already considerable workload became even bigger.

Yet with all this, he suddenly had spare time. Out of concern for his health, Laura and Sara pushed him to take a break with a cup of tea, but Ryoma wanted nothing more than to get going.

I guess I could ease up a bit and use the extra time to rest, but considering the next war, I feel like I should be doing everything I can right now.

Just then, he heard the bell outside ring thirteen times, indicating that it was one in the afternoon. This was the signal he'd been waiting for, the call that heralded the beginning of his battle.

"Let's get going," Ryoma said, rising from the sofa.

Chapter 3: The Day of Separation

A bailiff led Ryoma back to the hall where he'd conducted his battle of words that morning. The same nobles were seated before him, and like last time, fully armed knights lined the wall. The only difference was that the witness stand now had a chair next to it, which wasn't there that morning.

I guess they're implying I should sit there.

It was a fine chair too. It was made of wood, but it looked sturdy and large enough to accommodate Ryoma's hulking physique. Be that as it may, one had to wonder if it was worthy of a noble.

Not a bad chair, in and of itself, but...

It was not cushioned and without any ornaments to speak of. One might even wonder where the House of Lords had found it. A stubborn noble would absolutely refuse to sit on this kind of chair.

But I wouldn't do that.

An not cushioned wooden chair wasn't the most comfortable, but it was still an improvement overall. Nonetheless, taking a seat without the director's permission would be rude. In fact, this might even be a trap.

I want to believe I'm just being overly cautious, but things are very different compared to this morning.

It was just a question of whether he should take a seat or not. Normally, if he'd just sat down in the chair, it wouldn't have been much of a problem. Despite the difference in their ranks, Ryoma still had a noble title. At most, the other nobles would cock an eyebrow at his impoliteness. But things were different now. Giving the enemy any excuse to get back at him could very well spell the end of Ryoma's life.

Ryoma stood in the same position as yesterday and bowed his head to the nobles leading the hearing.

“The time you’ve given me to rest was quite valuable. I thank you profoundly for allowing this.”

Marquis Halcyon clicked his tongue. He was no doubt annoyed to see the hearing resume the same way it’d started that morning, but the only ones who heard him do so were the highest-ranking members of the House of Lords, Count Eisenbach and the marquis himself. Marquis Halcyon had kept his voice down lest he be heard, but his annoyance had gotten the better of him.

Ryoma, with his keen sense of hearing, did hear him.

Well, I guess Marquis Halcyon would be annoyed. A low-ranking noble got one up on him and forced him to take a break in the hearing. And seeing things play out the same way they did this morning is going to make him cautious.

Ryoma didn’t mean anything by starting things the same way he had earlier, and if the opposition was that wary of him, it would be unwise to act blindly. Creating needless misunderstandings could send things spiraling the wrong way.

Ryoma raised his head, and the first thing he saw was Marquis Halcyon wearing a very bitter expression. Sitting beside him was Count Hamilton, who had been glaring at Ryoma with anger and bloodlust, but he’d only displayed these emotions while Ryoma kept his head bowed.

As nobles, the marquis and the count knew how to mask their feelings, but the fact that Ryoma had requested they hand over Douglas Hamilton and leave Douglas’s punishment to him in exchange for assuaging his suspicions of the trial’s impartialness must have truly annoyed them. No noble appreciated having to hand over their relatives. Even if said relative was involved in a crime, the rules of nobility dictated that the matter fell to the family head. Count Hamilton allowing Ryoma to handle the matter was unusual.

He probably figured I couldn’t dispose of Douglas within the House of Lords anyway. Plus, he didn’t really have a choice, since if I’d have kept grumbling, it would have invalidated the entire hearing.

As far as Ryoma could tell, the House of Lords wanted to settle the score with him during this hearing. He’d woven his plans around this assumption, and the events of the morning all but convinced him that this was indeed the case. Of

course, “settling the score” didn’t mean negotiating a compromise; they wanted to settle things conclusively—by legally executing Ryoma Mikoshiba.

They’d never planned to let Ryoma leave this place alive. With that in mind, it made sense that they broke the established rules of nobility to basically place Ryoma under house arrest here. And it also made sense that the situation turned against them when they were questioned for doing so. Marquis Halcyon’s claims that this harassment hadn’t been initiated by the top brass of the House of Lords was likely true, yet the top brass weren’t entirely unrelated to it either.

He probably figured they’d be executing me either way, so he may as well look away while his subordinates let out some pent-up aggression against me.

This was just proof that they’d already decided how this trial would end, but even if they knew Ryoma’s fate was sealed, the human heart didn’t always abide by one’s plans. Although they were mere hours away from getting what they wanted, the nobles couldn’t restrain their hatred and anger toward Ryoma, even if that outburst was entirely momentary.

In comparison to Marquis Halcyon and Count Hamilton, Count Eisenbach looked composed, as one might expect, but Ryoma could keenly sense the hatred brewing inside the man.

He’s crossing his arms, but they’re shaking. He must really be suppressing a lot of anger at me.

The count was able to maintain a calm smile. Perhaps this was indicative of his superior self-discipline, or maybe, unlike the other two, he hadn’t been as involved in the verbal dogfight that morning. Either way, any hearing spearheaded by these people couldn’t possibly be impartial.

“Now, with your misgivings cleared, I would like to begin today’s hearing,” Marquis Halcyon said and struck his gavel against the sounding block.

This kind of gavel wasn’t used in Japanese courtrooms, but it was used in American ones. It produced a satisfying clacking sound that echoed through the hall and changed everyone’s behavior at once. They had all shifted gears, preparing to begin the hearing.

Yeah, I can see why that's effective at times like these.

Maybe someone who'd come from Ryoma's world had introduced the usage of a gavel in court, or maybe the people of Rearth had come to the same idea on their own, but using a gavel wasn't strictly for appearances.

As that thought crossed Ryoma's mind, Marquis Halcyon said, "Now then, let the hearing begin." He looked around the room and paused, then turned his eyes to Ryoma with a severe expression. Behind his gaze was hatred burning with enmity and scorn, but that hadn't changed since the first moment Marquis Halcyon had laid eyes on Ryoma. What had changed was that this hatred was now charged with bloodlust.

I guess he's ticked off at me for having caught him with his pants down and for striking a blow on his dignity.

Nobles prioritized appearances and dignity. To those living in the modern world, it felt like nothing more than absurd and empty pride, but for the nobles of Rearth, they were important factors for maintaining their family honor.

There was a comparable example of this in Japanese religion—a portable shrine called a mikoshi. Mikoshi were usually stored in a Japanese temple. The gods said to reside in those temples would then temporarily inhabit the mikoshi so that they could be taken outside the bounds of their temple. Mikoshi were sacred, and they were necessary for maintaining the gods' might and holiness. A monument made of scrap wood or plastic wasn't a proper mikoshi, and no person would hold a ritual using one like that. Normally one would carry the most extravagant, dignified mikoshi possible.

Nobles maintaining their family honor was much the same. They only had power and authority as long as they had vassals and citizens to support them. Regardless of whether they achieved that through terror or affection, nobles were only nobles because others saw them as such. No vassal would follow a house head who didn't have some kind of pretentious air to him, and the same held true for their constituents. As a matter of fact, some nobles had been abandoned by their commoners and vassals, after which they hadn't been able to maintain their family honor.

An influential family like House Halcyon, which was one of the most

prominent houses in Rhoadseria and served as director of the House of Lords, wasn't going to lose its standing that easily, but the fact remained that a hated upstart had pulled the carpet from under his feet, and this was something Marquis Halcyon couldn't stand for. There was only one way to ease the pain of that blow.

I guess they're getting serious.

So far, Rhoadseria's nobles had just viewed Ryoma as an enemy, but things had now changed. Today, for the first time, Marquis Halcyon marked Ryoma as a personal enemy. His gaze was full of bloodlust that glinted with the sheen of a blade.

Faced with such eyes, no one could be foolish enough to expect a fair, impartial trial—Ryoma had prepared for this to begin with—but when Marquis Halcyon spoke next, Ryoma doubted if he'd heard him correctly.

“That said, I personally feel there's no need to hear your side of the story, Baron Mikoshiba.”

The nobles around Marquis Halcyon hummed in agreement. There were no doubts anymore concerning the investigation that Marquis Halcyon and the House of Lords were conducting. Whether that was a valid observation or a foolish statement was another matter altogether, but that wasn't the biggest issue here.

Wow, so that's their angle.

Ryoma sighed. The House of Lords' intentions had been obvious from the very beginning, and Ryoma had little trust in this world's legal system to begin with. However, their blatant partiality naturally made Ryoma feel disgusted. It meant that they'd cast aside any and all pretense of a just cause.

This world is a land of survival of the fittest, and on top of that, its class system is much more rigid than any in modern society. Most of the House of Lords' nobles are from old families that have been around since Rhoadseria's founding. By comparison, I'm a nobody who came from nowhere. In their minds, I'm not even in the same arena as them. I guess when you think about it that way, what Marquis Halcyon just said would be obvious to any other noble in this kingdom. Still, if he were to say what he just said in front of a judge or jury in

Japan, the attorney would impeach him right away.

Without a doubt, this had all been to maintain the illusion of a just, impartial trial. What many people who didn't work in the legal system seemed to misunderstand was that the law didn't necessarily equal justice. Justice was merely an ideal that existed in the hearts of individual people. And though people's ideas of justice had some points of commonality, it differed by the individual based on factors like their environment, ideology, religion, and history.

Meanwhile, the legal system was made from the average values formed by a group of individuals. And indeed, most people would accept the legal system's judgment. Or perhaps one could say that its judgment was within the boundaries of what they found acceptable and correct.

It was natural that they'd feel this way; people with brilliant minds spent an inordinate amount of time and effort to tune the system's average values into something most people would agree is okay. The law was a measurement of what behavior was acceptable while maintaining the group known as society. That said, even though law and justice weren't the same thing, there was a great deal of overlap between them, so much so that a lawyer's badge was fashioned after a scale—the scales being the symbol of the goddess of justice, Themis, the embodiment of impartialness.

But although there was overlap between law and justice, they weren't exactly the same. There was a subtle discrepancy between them, and a justice system's credibility depended on how much it could minimize this discrepancy. Of course, a judge was still human, so completely separating the law from one's preconceptions and sense of personal justice was incredibly difficult. Even gods in myths were prone to becoming emotional and making errors in judgment, so if the gods couldn't be expected to never make a mistake, a flawed human surely couldn't be expected to remain perfectly fair and neutral.

For example, it would be difficult to completely remove one's personal emotions to forgive the culprit in a trial for a crime as heinous as the killing of an infant. Nevertheless, saying that to the defendant's face was a different matter. If one was about to embark on an act as haughty and patronizing as judging a fellow human being, they had to maintain the appearance of impartial

fairness, even if it was just a facade. One had to avoid the implication that a third party was somehow involved in the trial. Whatever one's feelings were, there were times when being upfront about your thoughts wasn't the right thing to do.

In that regard, Marquis Halcyon's behavior was unacceptable, but this was from a modern standpoint.

I guess that even if their positions are similar, the director of the House of Lords isn't technically a judge, and trials in this world don't really care much for ethics and the like.

While the ideas of fairness and justice did exist, they weren't the same as modern society saw them. Even in modern times, the ideas of what justice was varied by time and place, so expecting a different world to carry the same ideas would be pointless.

Not that this means I'm just going to roll over here and let them go ahead with their idea of justice, though.

Ryoma wouldn't call this world evil altogether, nor would he denounce Marquis Halcyon's idea of justice, but he had no intention of talking to him in order to smooth over this difference in their ideals. True, dialogue was crucial for understanding one another. People in disagreement could come to a compromise through conversation and put an end to conflict. But in this world, Ryoma also knew that this was nothing but naive idealism.

Yet Marquis Halcyon was too confident in his superiority and had no way of knowing Ryoma's thoughts. With a vulgar smile that certainly wasn't appropriate for his high social status, he said, "Baron Mikoshiba, I think you have some misunderstandings about the House of Lords. We take pride in having protected this kingdom as guardians of the law since the country's founding. And so, before we opened this hearing, we spent months investigating the matter. At this point, hearing the subjective opinion of those involved is unlikely to be meaningful. When all is said and done, there can be no denying the facts. You broke national law and destroyed House Salzberg and the ten houses of the north."

His words were what everyone in attendance was thinking from the bottom

of their hearts, but at the same time, they were inappropriate for the director of the House of Lords who was running this hearing. After all, a hearing's purpose was to question witnesses and determine if there was a reason to go to trial. Like Marquis Halcyon said, the opinion of those involved was subjective and biased, but that wasn't a reason to simply do away with questioning the witnesses. If nothing else, doing so would reflect badly on the country.

It was then that another voice spoke from Marquis Halcyon's side.

"Marquis Halcyon, I think what you say is absolutely true," started Count Eisenbach. "However, formally speaking, that could be problematic..."

Marquis Halcyon cocked his head curiously. He was apparently pondering if there was any meaning in spending time on a hearing whose verdict was a forgone conclusion, but sensing the truth in the count's words, he conceded, "No, you're right. I may have been impatient."

Clearing his throat, Marquis Halcyon turned to Ryoma again.

"Let us begin the hearing in earnest then, Baron Mikoshiba. Do you have anything to say in your defense with regards to this case?"

Marquis Halcyon's expression was that of a man confident in his victory. It made sense he would feel that way too.

The facts being what they are...

Ryoma wasn't going to deny that he'd killed the heads of the ten houses of the north, but that didn't mean he was going to act the way the House of Lords expected him to and accept the blame for what happened.

"In my defense, you say... It's true that in this last war, I defeated and destroyed the Salzberg county and the leaders of the ten houses of the north. However, I'm afraid I don't understand why the House of Lords beckoned me here to this hearing as a result. All I did was act on my debt of gratitude to Her Majesty, Queen Lupis Rhoadserians. I abided by my duty to this kingdom."

Ryoma's words echoed loudly within the room, and when he finished, silence settled over the hall. It took everyone a few moments to fully understand what Ryoma had said, but once they did, the hall filled with angry shouts and jeers.

That's absurd. What is he saying?! Marquis Halcyon thought as he turned to Count Eisenbach, who was seated beside him. None of them could mask their confusion or their shock. Ryoma, on the other hand, was perfectly calm.

That man admitted to starting the war and destroying the Salzberg county and the ten houses of the north. How can he be so calm?!

Marquis Halcyon's disbelief was understandable; Ryoma had basically admitted to the crime he was accused of, but he'd called into question whether his actions were actually crime or not.

Surely he's not so oblivious that he doesn't understand what he just said? No, we're dealing with this upstart, so that can't be.

The marquis glared at Ryoma with a composed expression, like he was trying to peer into Ryoma's heart. Ryoma's apology was unimaginable, and Marquis Halcyon had to ask himself what Ryoma was trying to achieve with his reply.

"I'm ashamed to admit that I may be too ignorant to understand your meaning, Baron Mikoshiba," said Count Eisenbach, who was harboring the same doubts as the marquis. "Could you perhaps explain it in simpler terms?"

The count remained as calm and polite as possible and didn't brush off Ryoma's reply as the rambling of a simpleton. Maybe he believed that provoking Ryoma at this point would get in the way of the hearing's progress, and he didn't want a repeat of what had happened that morning.

Carrying on the conversation and poking holes in my arguments would be much more effective, Ryoma thought. *And here I was, expecting them to get emotional and deny everything I say.* Ryoma's opinion on his opponent was improving.

This hearing was effectively a battlefield. Only one thing set it apart from a real battle: to defeat his enemy, Ryoma couldn't depend on violence, but on his rhetoric.

Strategically speaking, charging at one's opponent and trying to deny their words out of sheer emotion was a fool's errand. It was akin to running one's army into enemy territory without any tactics in mind. It would just lead to a war of attrition.

To the House of Lords, the outcome of this battle was all but decided, so rather than needlessly wasting time at this junction, it was easier to hear Ryoma out and find flaws in his reasoning. Ryoma was just a commoner to them, but his achievements in the civil war and the expedition to Xarooda had made him a hero to the people of Rhoadseria, so letting him speak also made the House of Lords look more respectable.

Unfortunately for the House of Lords, Ryoma had included this in his calculations already, so he recited what he'd practiced ahead of time.

"Even if you ask me that, I'm not sure how to explain it any simpler. I must admit, I'm not sure if I can make you understand." Ryoma scratched his cheek, acting like a parent embarrassed by his child's prank.

Count Eisenbach ignored his provocation and said, "I see. I suppose plain men like us can't hope to understand the intricate ways in which a national hero such as yourself works. Nonetheless, if you do not tell us, how are we to ever understand? Or are you trying to insult us, claiming we are too stupid to understand your meaning?"

Ryoma smiled sarcastically. Honestly, he wanted to nod in the affirmative, but doing so would prompt Count Eisenbach to criticize him for openly mocking them. It would be one step too far from the roundabout provocations he'd used so far, so he had to deny the implication.

"Of course not. That isn't my intent at all."

"That's good to hear," Count Eisenbach said. "We are, after all, both nobles devoted to serving the royal family. We can't very well defend this kingdom if we keep arguing over petty misunderstandings, can we?"

The count then scowled hatefully at Ryoma. He was probably hoping to trip Ryoma up with his own words and cut him down in one fell swoop.

"Baron Mikoshiba, you said earlier that you only acted to repay your debt of gratitude to Her Majesty. However, Count Salzberg and the ten houses of the north were distinguished families charged with defending northern Rhoadseria. We are all in consensus that in locking blades with them, you have left the region without leaders and placed the northern borders in crisis. It is also in violation of Rhoadserian law, which forbids private wars between nobles, yet

you clearly brought about this situation, Baron Mikoshiba. And you, yourself, admitted to that much earlier. Correct?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“And despite that, you still claim you don’t understand why you have been called here?”

There was a dangerous edge to Count Eisenbach’s voice that implied he wasn’t going to permit Ryoma to talk his way out of this. Ryoma, in contrast, merely shrugged, as if the count’s menacing tone was nothing but a light breeze.

“To be honest, I haven’t the foggiest clue,” he said boldly.

Ryoma was acting arrogant and brazen. Count Eisenbach looked daunted for a second—he likely hadn’t expected Ryoma to deny his accusations so openly—but he couldn’t very well just drop the matter now.

Count Eisenbach cleared his throat and gave Ryoma a mocking smile. “You’re being oddly ignorant for someone whom the people regard as a ‘national hero,’ aren’t you? Or do you think yourself above the law, being the hero that you are?”

Those words were what Ryoma was waiting for.

“Yes. I do.”

His voice echoed loudly through the hall once again. No one had expected him to actually answer that question in the affirmative. Everyone was rendered speechless, then the next instant, the nobles erupted into angry shouting.

“That’s rubbish! What are you saying?!”

“Did the commoners praising you as some kind of national hero go to your head?!”

The room filled with voices criticizing Ryoma, but he remained completely unaffected by their tempers. He’d just stated his rights, as if to pressure everyone around him.

“I think you’re under some kind of misunderstanding, gentlemen,” Ryoma said, his voice echoing sonorously through the room. “I’m not boasting of my

achievements and saying they give me license to break the law. What I'm saying is that I had no duty to obey the law in the first place."

His words, loaded with the vigor of a skilled warrior, forced everyone to fall silent. After a moment, Marquis Halcyon, who'd held his tongue during Count Eisenbach's verbal duel with Ryoma, spoke up.

"What do you mean?" he asked, justifiably confused.

"I mean exactly what I said. When I was named governor of the Wortenia Peninsula, Her Majesty granted me unique exceptions. I'm sure that as director of the House of Lords, you're aware of that, right, Marquis Halcyon? Or did you, as a man in a key position within this country, truly not know about that?"

Ryoma spoke like this was all a trifling affair, but Marquis Halcyon and the other members of the House of Lords went quiet.

"That can't be..."

No one was sure which of them had said that, but whoever it was, he'd spoken for everyone present. If what Ryoma said was true, the very reason behind this hearing was rendered moot.

Seeing their reactions, Ryoma continued, "When my achievements in the civil war earned me the peninsula, I made several requests of Her Majesty so I could fulfill her order to develop a barren land swarming with monsters and teeming with pirates. I am but a lowly upstart, though. I have no family to depend on, and I lacked any considerable fortune. In order for me to develop the peninsula, I had to ask Her Majesty for all manner of assistance."

The instant he heard Ryoma's words, Marquis Halcyon's expression changed. "Freedom of legislation, military, diplomacy, and finances," the marquis whispered, guessing at what Ryoma was about to say. The other nobles stirred.

"And exemption from taxation and military duty," Ryoma appended.

This was something of a famous story among Rhoadseria's nobles. After the civil war concluded, Queen Lupis had awarded Ryoma with this dubious honor. Having received lordship over an undeveloped frontier land, he'd made a few demands that exceeded all precedents that the nobles, who stressed the importance of history, valued. Still, not even the nobles, with all their hate for

Ryoma, could oppose the queen's choice to give him Wortenia. If they were to do so, the queen would have replied, "You develop that land, then."

Besides, Wortenia had been a wasteland at the time and incomparable to the lands these nobles ruled over. Queen Lupis couldn't have ordered any of them to carry out such a reckless request. Doing so would risk breathing new life into the weakened nobles' faction. Still, she could have given that order anyway.

Even if she didn't ask us to give up our territories for Wortenia, Marquis Halcyon thought, she could have demanded we contribute the funds necessary for its development.

Marquis Halcyon thought back to the state of the country back then. It would have taken a large sum to develop an ordinary domain, to say nothing of an undeveloped one. All of the nobles knew that. And the land in question wasn't just any undeveloped land; it was the infamously untamed Wortenia Peninsula. Currently, it was the goose that laid the golden egg, but at the time, it was nothing short of a no-man's-land. Ryoma was said to have requested one million gold coins from Queen Lupis to fund the development, but the nobles all agreed that even if she'd supplied him with that much money, it would have all gone to waste. No noble wanted to sink money into that land.

At worst, he might have plotted for us to speak up about it, only for us to get dragged into it.

Marquis Halcyon knew of the discord between Ryoma and Queen Lupis now, but back then, he couldn't have guessed that things would turn out this way. Ryoma had helped Queen Lupis when she was at her weakest, and he'd contributed to her taking the throne after the civil war. No one had suspected that she was trying to lock this hero away in the Wortenia Peninsula with the intention of keeping him there until he died. To Marquis Halcyon, it had all looked like some kind of ploy. The nobles had merely watched on, hating the boy but not daring to speak up. When the expedition to Xarooda began, Marquis Halcyon became convinced his suspicion was correct.

But he accepted the order to join the expedition. He did that out of obedience to the queen, right?

From Marquis Halcyon's perspective, he didn't want to go to a neighboring

country as reinforcements. His soldiers wouldn't be allowed to pillage, and he likely couldn't acquire any new land this way. At most, one would earn the allied army's gratitude and perhaps a treasured sword from the other kingdom's king, but at worst, all one would get out of it was a word of thanks. It was an honor, but there was little profit from joining an expedition.

All the same, refusing the queen's order would have been difficult, and Ryoma hadn't objected to drawing the short straw, even though he could have used the special privileges Queen Lupis had promised him as an excuse. Ryoma had agreed to the expedition out of consideration for the western continent's state of affairs, but a noble like Marquis Halcyon, whose first instinct was to protect his own family's honor, wouldn't have thought to act that way.

Even now, Ryoma could read Marquis Halcyon's heart, and he cracked a cold smile.

The Marquis is more or less correct. I did what I did to instill that idea in their heads, after all, Ryoma thought.

Ryoma's compliance then had thrown a wrench in Queen Lupis's and the House of Lords' plans later down the line. His obedience had given the nobles the impression that he was subject to Rhoadseria's laws like any other noble, and it was the biggest reason they'd never suspected otherwise.

Now was the time for Ryoma to play this trump card he'd kept hidden all this time. No one present could deny his claims. The queen had granted Ryoma those privileges, and none of them could argue against that.

After watching their reaction, Ryoma moved to twist the knife. "But, like I said earlier, I am honored to receive a noble title despite my lowly background, so I couldn't stand by and watch as the kingdom careened on the edge of crisis."

"Crisis? And you're saying that was your reason for defeating Count Salzberg?" Marquis Halcyon asked, directing a hateful look at Ryoma.

Ryoma nodded back, then spoke to strike at the marquis.

"This country is currently overcome with unprecedented chaos, but I'm sure there's no need for me to clarify the cause behind it." Ryoma glared at everyone around him, his eyes full of criticism and condemnation.

Rhoadseria's nobles were harsh governors. It wasn't unusual for them to sell families into slavery after they failed to pay their taxes or for them to extort attractive commoners or their families after they'd caught the noble's fancy, forcing them into their clutches. Some were even already betrothed to another.

Incidentally, during the Middle Ages in Europe and across the world, it was said that rulers could invoke the right of the first night, where on the wedding night, a man in power or a priest could bed the bride before the groom did. It was hard to tell if it was but a vulgar story or a reflection of mankind's dark side, because there were no sources to validate the claim. There were also multiple interpretations of these stories, which contributed to obscuring the truth. Some said rulers only did so to show off their authority and power, while others said there might have been some kind of ritualistic aspect to it. Or maybe it was a sort of tax meant to punish the bridegroom. Morals and justice differed based on historical background and region, so it was hard to assign a reason.

From a modern viewpoint, this idea was barbaric. It was, of course, just a footnote in the history books, but to the people of this world, Rhoadseria's nobles weren't that much different from the rulers of the Middle Ages. They might have even been more hellish at times.

The people living in this world were neither saints nor fools. They didn't openly rebel against the nobility, but that wasn't to say they weren't discontent or that they accepted the harsh, terrible reality they lived in.

They simply know that any weapon they use is powerless against nobles who wield the supernatural power of thaumaturgy.

They were weak, so they had no choice but to keep their mouths shut and resign themselves to the ruling class's tyranny and despotism. When it came to defending the lives and assets of their families, commoners just kept their heads down and waited for the storm to pass them by.

Nevertheless, patience could only last so long. Their dissatisfaction with the nobility, which remained without an outlet, smoldered deep within their hearts. It was the hatred and anger of the oppressed, passed down from parent to child, and from child to grandchild. The disorder in the kingdom, borne of precarious national politics, just fanned the embers into outright flames.

Question is, can these nobles even understand the consequences of what they've done? Honestly, I'm not holding my breath.

Ryoma believed that if the nobles had been capable of understanding their part in it all, then things wouldn't have gotten this bad to begin with. The truth was that Rhoadseria's current state was a direct result of the nobles' tyranny, but it was unlikely they'd admit it just because an up-and-coming noble gently pointed it out to them. And sure enough, their reaction to Ryoma's angry glare was a chilly one.

"Yes, our country is currently in a state of upheaval," Marquis Halcyon conceded. "And like you said, Baron Mikoshiba, the cause for it is obvious. However, there's no guarantee that what you claim is the cause is the same as what we believe."

Marquis Halcyon cast a suggestive glance at the nobles around him. Everyone understood what he was implying.

When all was said and done, they were intent on shifting the blame. Marquis Halcyon wasn't completely off the mark, though. In the end, what mattered was one's position. Who would be taken more seriously, the individual or the noble? Most of the people here saw themselves as nobles before they saw themselves as mere individuals.

"I agree with Marquis Halcyon," Count Eisenbach said. "And if I may state my personal opinion, regardless of if the country is in a state of turmoil, it does nothing to absolve you of responsibility for killing Count Salzberg and the heads of the ten houses. What say you to that, Baron Mikoshiba? If you claim that you were justified in your actions, please, share with us your hero's perspective."

As one of the most high-ranking members of the House of Lords, Count Eisenbach aimed to provoke Ryoma with a storm of vilification. It did not have the desired effect. Ryoma's assumption had been right, but he only felt tired and resigned.

Guess I was right on the money about them.

Of the many countries in the western continent, Rhoadseria's class system was particularly rigid. What set it apart from other kingdoms was how the king's power was greatly restricted.

Queen Lupis's father, the former king, had acted to have his authority gradually returned to him, but even with his efforts, the road to restoring the royalty's power was a long one. Rhoadseria's nobility was powerful, and the country stressed tradition and formality. Rhoadseria boasted four hundred years of history, and the nobility had no desire or intention to change the status quo. To most of them, commoners were merely an asset to make their own lives richer—no different from cattle—and they cared little if their livestock was displeased with how they were treated.

These nobles won't change, will they? I guess they wouldn't. Why would they want to change now?

The only time the nobles truly understood the commoners' fury and resentment was when they erupted, when the commoners came to claim their and their families' heads.

Sowing contempt of the nobility in the commoners' hearts to spread chaos in this country is the invisible enemy's goal. Though, I guess my seeing through that ploy and using it in my favor makes me no better than them. Still, their methods are dirty. I guess I'll just be satisfied knowing that they get what they deserve.

Since being sent to the Wortenia Peninsula, Ryoma had devised multiple plans, yet not once had he lit the fuse of his own will. All he'd ever done was throw a spark into a vat of oil that had been boiling there beforehand. Even then, he'd never wanted to put those plans into action. He'd always acted to overturn the plans that those lurking and gloating in the shadows of Rhoadseria had set in motion. He'd always acted for one goal and one goal only: to protect himself and the allies under his wing from encroaching danger.

I feel bad for the commoners, being unwitting pawns in all this, but still...

Ryoma was sincere in his sympathy, but he had no other choice but to act the way he did. The commoners' unrest toward the nobles had smoldered in their hearts long before Ryoma came into the picture, and the country's ruling classes refused to acknowledge that fact. So once someone ignited that hatred, it would spread like wildfire in a field of thorns, consuming Rhoadseria to its core.

Ryoma didn't want Queen Lupis or the House of Lords to see the truth of this outcome, and he seriously doubted they were at all capable of doing so. People believed what they wanted to believe, and they were helplessly blind to what they wanted to ignore, so when an upstart from nowhere spoke, the nobles refused to listen, no matter how correct he was. Even if Ryoma were to tell them the truth about the shadow group in the western continent that was pulling the strings from behind the scenes, they would never lend him an ear.

Not that it's my problem at this point.

If that was what the nobles wanted, it saved Ryoma the trouble of telling them, but things were different if it infringed on the rights and profits of Ryoma and his companions.

The Organization... Whatever their endgame is, they likely want to spread war. I guess they're like arms dealers and warmongers in my world. I remember reading about stuff like that in comics and books.

Truth was often stranger than fiction, and in this world, that was doubly true. The problem was that there was no telling who the Organization's lackeys were.

If I'm to believe what King Julianus said, that old guy's probably the best suspect.

A man's face crossed Ryoma's mind—a middle-aged man with a friendly, amicable smile. From the first moment Ryoma met him, he'd felt something was fishy about the man. He was Japanese, just like him, but Ryoma felt no affinity for him, only aversion. Ryoma's warrior intuition caught onto the devilish aura he gave off. Ryoma had no solid proof about any of this. All he had was his gut, which was warning him that this man was almost certainly guilty. But if his gut was correct, then the Organization's hand reached deep into the Rhoadserian palace.

No point in even trying to explain all of this to people who won't listen. It's about time I bring in the big guns and put an end to this.

Now would be the best time to turn the tides of this hearing, since the nobles' jeering and mocking laughter had lost much of its intensity.

Ryoma heaved a heavy, theatrical sigh. "I understand. You've made your

discontent with me quite clear, gentlemen. It seems you and I cannot come to an agreement. I don't think there's any point in continuing this discussion any longer."

Depending on how one interpreted what Ryoma had just said, his words were careless. Indeed, one of the nobles lost his temper, rose from his chair, and shouted at Ryoma.

"What did you—"

But before he was fully upright, he stopped and swallowed the insult that had climbed all the way up his throat. He'd frozen because Ryoma had directed a look of such bloodlust at him that it was unlike anything they'd seen from the baron thus far. Such was the difference between a man who knew the field of battle and one who sat on his laurels and reaped the fruits of his social status. The surrounding nobles all sensed it too.

"Then why don't we have our great queen take the stage and give us her take on this matter?" Ryoma suggested. "Isn't that right, Your Majesty, Queen Lupis Rhoadserians?"

This was the final task Ryoma would take on as a vassal of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

Everyone in the room was shocked into silence. "What manner of nonsense is he talking about?" one of the nobles murmured.

Marquis Halcyon's reaction differed ever so slightly from the rest, and Ryoma didn't overlook it.

It was only a second, but his eyes flicked to the door he left from. So that's what it means.

Sensing that his guess was correct, Ryoma thrust his blade deeper.

"Or what, you can't bring yourself to be around me? Are you just going to admit your fault without even showing yourself?"

Those weren't words one directed at their liege, but they had their intended effect. The door finally opened.

The first thing Ryoma saw was a knight with long black hair. She was clad in

full armor, like she was about to engage in battle, and she carried a sword, which was forbidden for anyone who wasn't a member of the House of Lords. Any knight who broke this rule would usually be sentenced to death for this transgression.

More troubling than the female knight, however, was the woman that followed her.

"Your Majesty? What are you doing here?" one of the nobles muttered.



His surprise was felt by all the nobles. While the House of Lords was part of the palace, the queen herself would never come here.

Marquis Halcyon paid no heed to his colleagues' surprise and swiftly stood from his chair and kneeled, displaying fealty and respect to his queen. Seeing this, the other nobles snapped out of their shock and did the same. Ryoma, who had called her here, also kneeled.

"It's been a long time since we last met, Baron Mikoshiba. You may raise your head," Queen Lupis said, her tone slightly bitter.

Ryoma did as she said and slowly raised his head. His gaze clashed with Queen Lupis's, and at that moment, the nobles saw red sparks flicker between them. Those sparks were but an illusion induced by the strangely tense air brewing between the two of them, but the nobles certainly did see it. Everyone held their breath. The pressure hanging over the hearing was so intense that one didn't dare blink. Neither of the two seemed to have any intention of looking away from the other.

Oh, I see. So she's not stepping down. I suppose she's matured from the princess I knew back then.

Ryoma had to admit that Queen Lupis had grown. When they'd last parted ways, they had both decided how to evaluate each other. This evaluation had nothing to do with their social position—it was their impression of each other as people. And once someone decided on their impression of another person, it was hard to change it.

Queen Lupis's resolve in being here was so intense that it changed Ryoma's impression of her, but their expressions were still opposed. One of them wore a brazen smile, while the other spoiled their beautiful features by letting their expression contort with hatred and anger. Needless to say, the former was Ryoma and the latter was the queen of this country.

I guess it only makes sense, since she can't choose peaceful reconciliation at this point. She could have ignored my provocation, but she chose to show herself anyway. She must want to put an end to this personally.

There was no need for Queen Lupis to come here. In fact, she shouldn't have

come at all. In times of strife, people sought heroes, and after Ryoma ended the civil war and helped protect the Kingdom of Xarooda from the O'ltromea Empire's invasion, he became a subject of awe and fear, even if temporarily, and at the same time, a hero.

The queen personally involving herself with judging such a renowned hero would cast an unfavorable light on her. As the queen, she would have to sign off on the verdict either way, but it would have still maintained appearances if she'd merely affirmed the House of Lords' judgment.

Queen Lupis knew this better than anyone, so she'd watched the entire proceedings from a separate room. Even if she herself didn't realize it, her aide, Meltina, would have stopped her from interfering, but the fact that she stood here despite all of that could only mean one thing.

She's going to decide this right here, right now, while she's prepared for the risks involved. Not an unexpected development. I presented this opening to draw her out and get her to exploit it, so it's a good thing she fell for it.

Ryoma could sense the conflict growing under Queen Lupis's mask of animosity and loathing. If one had to fault someone for all of this happening to begin with, the blame lay with Queen Lupis and her decision to lock Ryoma away in the Wortenia Peninsula.

Ryoma had been intent on leaving Rhoadseria after the civil war, but she'd thrust a noble title and a domain upon him in the form of a reward, forcing him to stay in the country. Queen Lupis was certainly the perpetrator for making up this reason, and Ryoma was a victim forced to act in self-defense.

Had Queen Lupis remained as she was a couple of years ago, the guilt would have paralyzed her, preventing her from taking any extreme measures, no matter how much personal dislike she harbored for Ryoma. Despite that, the fact that she'd shown herself—even if it was because of Ryoma's provocation—proved that she was willing to brave hardship for the good of her kingdom.

You can't rule over a kingdom with just pretty words and ideals. I won't say sticking by ideals is wrong, but she just doesn't...or rather, didn't understand that you need overwhelming power to act on those promises.

Being a king or leader charged with a country's future meant they couldn't

waver in their decisions. They couldn't appear to be indecisive. Of course, even kings were human beings, and they were as susceptible to regret and reflection as anyone else. Nonetheless, a king's role was to be decisive. If they wavered in their decisions, those working under them wouldn't know how to act. And at long last, Queen Lupis had no choice but to come to that realization.

It was often said that people grew into their roles. After much hardship, Lupis Rhoadserians had realized what being the leader of Rhoadseria meant.

It's sad. If she was like this to begin with, she might have been able to...

Ryoma truly believed this, but it was too late by now. The die has already been cast.

"Let me ask you one thing," Queen Lupis said, breaking the silence. "Why?"

Her question was sorely lacking in context, but to Ryoma, it was clear what she meant.

"You ask why? Does this question even merit an answer at this point?"

Queen Lupis lowered her eyes. She knew that after all this time and all that had happened, it was a meaningless question. Having realized that, she had to once again ask herself why she'd asked him that.

Meltina, who stood at Lupis's side, directed a concerned glance at her queen. Sensing her gaze, Queen Lupis gently shook her head at Meltina and turned to Ryoma. Her eyes glinted with a stern will.

"Yes, I know that question was nothing but sentimentality. But...but I do need to ask it now, at the very end. I am the queen, after all."

This was the final respect she would direct to the hero she was about to judge as a criminal. Knowing this, Ryoma answered honestly.

"Well, simply put, I did it because it was necessary for me to survive, I suppose."

"Necessary to survive?" Queen Lupis cocked her head.

It was a rather pessimistic answer coming from a young hero. If he'd have said he did it all to become king of a country, it would have felt more appropriate. And indeed, the onlooking nobles all gave Ryoma dubious looks. They were all

under the impression that Ryoma's war in the north stemmed from the inappropriate ambition of an upstart who didn't know his place.

But Ryoma spoke from his heart, paying no heed to the gazes fixed on him.

"Well, a detailed explanation would be time-consuming, and I don't expect any of the nobles with their fixed, anachronistic ideas to understand, so I'll just cut to the chase," Ryoma said with a serene smile. "Put simply, your regime is inefficient and absurd, and I don't want to get involved in or die because of it. For better or worse, I'm just not that attached to this kingdom."

To the House of Lords' nobles, Ryoma's answer was treasonous, something that human trash who only cared about their own skin would say. However, if one were to think of a country as a company, his words weren't all that exceptional.

Ryoma was like an employee that the company known as Rhoadseria had picked up in the middle of his career. But no company, no matter how powerful, had a future if the senior staff took bribes and embezzled funds. The company would eventually be criticized for its management policies, the public would lose all trust in it, and it would go belly-up or get bought out.

A new employee who wasn't used to the company's politics could advocate for change, but the company would be too fixed in its traditions to do anything, leaving no room for reforms. And with Lupis Rhoadserians sitting at the top with an unsteady rule, staying aboard this sinking ship was all the more abhorrent.

A dictatorship was by no means acceptable, but an indecisive leader warped everything in their own way. At times like this, a new worker with no stakes in the company had just two options: run or fight. While this made sense to Ryoma, these nobles, fixed as they were in their ways and unwilling to feel remorse, couldn't understand that.

The nobles who'd held their tongues up to this point yelled so loudly that it shook the hall, but their cries meant nothing to Ryoma, nor did they do anything to shake his smile.

"Oh, I just want to clarify something so there are no misunderstandings. I'm not criticizing the way you run things here. I think your methods are foolish and

ineffective, but if this is how you run things in this world, it's not my place to deny or criticize you. You can buy your commoners' ire all you want, and I won't say a word, so long as it's got nothing to do with me. But if the way you act is going to get me or my comrades killed, or jeopardize the fortune and assets my people need to live, that makes it my problem."

Ryoma's tone was neutral, but it held within it the stern might of tempered steel. It was the voice of a man confident in the justice of his actions but, at the same time, prepared to accept that others would not understand and oppose him.

"And that's why you went to war against House Salzberg?" Queen Lupis asked.

"Yes. That man's greed was too unrestrained, and his people were suffering under his tyranny. With Lady Yulia's management skills, and with Epirus controlling the economy through its trade union, he was able to maintain a delicate balance, but it was too fragile to last. Any outside pressure would have made it fall apart. Since his territory neighbors mine, I couldn't overlook that. True, Wortenia is undeveloped land and my population is small, but even so, I couldn't forsake my duty to them as governor."

"Yes, it's a governor's duty to defend their territory, this much I'll grant you," replied Queen Lupis. "But if you knew Count Salzberg's administration was that terrible, why didn't you appeal to the House of Lords instead? The laws of this country dictate that the House of Lords is to serve as arbiters in disputes between nobles, and the monarch passes down the verdict!"

The surrounding nobles started jeering at Ryoma.

"That's right! Why didn't you turn to us?!"

"This is all an excuse! You just wanted Count Salzberg's domain for yourself!"

Seeing their reaction, Marquis Halcyon, who'd remained quiet so far, added, "Her Majesty is right. If you truly acted in the favor of the people, why didn't you report Count Salzberg's tyranny to us instead of resorting to attacking him of your own volition? Does this not prove that the war was brought on by your ambition?"

It was natural for a citizen of a country to obey its rules, or at least try to, but not even this justified criticism fazed Ryoma.

“No, that’s not why,” Ryoma explained. “I didn’t report it to the House of Lords because doing so would have been a waste of time. You’re all cut from the same cloth as Count Salzberg.” Ryoma then took out a sheet of paper from his pocket and extended it toward Meltina. “I apologize, but could I ask you to have Her Majesty read this?”

Meltina stared at the paper Ryoma held out, and though she glared at him with some bloodlust, she finally accepted it, if only out of respect for the place. Queen Lupis appeared to be interested in the paper’s contents, though. She took it from Meltina’s hands and swiftly unfolded it.

The paper listed the names of the House of Lords’ nobles, as well as countless numbers next to them. At first, Queen Lupis didn’t understand what she was seeing. She glanced at Ryoma, who was still smiling placidly, and tried to glean what meaning she could.

This paper lists the names of Marquis Halcyon and the other nobles in the House of Lords, with numbers allotted to them every month. The only noble listed who isn’t part of the House of Lords is Count Salzberg, at the top here. It’s no use. I can’t make sense of this on my own. But whatever it means, he wouldn’t bring it up unless it was important.

The numbers must have been something that would lend legitimacy to Ryoma’s actions, or at least back them up. A few possibilities came to Queen Lupis’s mind, and one of them was...

“No... Is this...?” The second she thought of it, her features tensed.

“It’s exactly what you think it is, Your Majesty,” Ryoma said, nodding. “These are the sums that Count Salzberg paid to the House of Lords’ nobles every month as support funds. Or, more simply, the bribes he paid them under the table.”

Ryoma’s voice echoed loudly through the room and lingered in the air long after the sound died out. Everyone remained silent. They all looked calm on the outside, but inside their hearts they racked their brains for a way to strike back against this surprise attack.

One of the nobles finally broke the silence. “That’s absurd... What are you saying?”

“A desperate trick to weasel your way out of this, I say!” another noble called out.

“Now, now, everyone. I too have no idea what this is all about, but let’s have Baron Mikoshiba explain this so-called evidence of his.”

“For the time being, I’d like to see what this paper says. We can confirm its validity after that.”

The nobles shouted out in turn, most of them speaking in denial and confusion. Maybe they really had no idea what Ryoma was talking about, or perhaps it was all just acting. Whichever it was, they were either claiming to be unaware or questioning Ryoma’s intentions.

Their reactions were just what one might expect from the monsters infesting Rhoadseria’s nobles. Despite how surprising Ryoma’s words were, the nobles didn’t show any signs of panic, nor did they insist that they were innocent. This wasn’t a movie where the culprit lost his temper and incriminated himself.

Some of them are third-rate actors at best, though, Ryoma thought.

They remained composed on the surface, but Ryoma still caught a few of their faces contorting, a mark of their inability to repress their agitation.

I mean, this isn’t going to stand as evidence in court anyway, so it doesn’t really matter in the end.

The real issue was the nobles who could completely restrain themselves. It was said that being a politician required one to use both one’s true intentions and falsehoods, and that was the same in this world as well. Skilled politicians were, in a sense, highly talented actors who had to maintain perfect control over their emotions. Of those nobles, Marquis Halcyon remained the most collected, and he made his move quickly.

“I wouldn’t want to impose, Your Majesty, but if I may see it too?”

Marquis Halcyon took the paper out of the queen’s hands and scanned it. The nobles around him all watched on nervously. A long moment passed, and

eventually Marquis Halcyon snorted derisively.

You fool, this isn't going to serve as evidence, the marquis thought.

If this document were stamped with House Halcyon's emblem, things might have been different, but as far as the marquis could see, it was just a sheet of paper with names and numbers on it. Though the marquis had remained composed, Ryoma's words had still struck panic into his heart. Now, however, he saw that he had nothing to fear. Maybe this was why he was able to expel his anxiety. He sighed, preparing to cut down this upstart's attempt at resistance and seal his sentence.

"Your Majesty, do not be taken in," the marquis said quietly. "This is all his pathetic attempt to set us up. I'm sure you'll see it too if you just calm yourself and think it through."

Marquis Halcyon chose his words carefully and meticulously, so as to remove the thorn of doubt tormenting Queen Lupis. His long experience had taught him that at times like this, letting his emotions take over while trying to argue his point would only backfire on him.

"Baron Mikoshiha has submitted this to you as evidence, Your Majesty, but as far as I can tell, this is just rows of numbers. There's no seal or anything of the sort to prove this paper's validity. Can you really call this evidence, Your Majesty?" Marquis Halcyon asked, pressing on her.

Queen Lupis replied, "That might be true, but..."

As a matter of fact, there were only names and numbers on the paper. There was no telling who wrote it, and it might as well have been written on a scrap of paper someone found on the floor. It wasn't any more useful than a child's scribble; it was ineffective in a trial.

Even so, Queen Lupis felt there must have been some significance to Ryoma's producing this paper at his hearing. After all, it was Ryoma Mikoshiha she was dealing with here—a man she knew to be thorough and meticulous. He wouldn't present something so laughable as evidence.

Ryoma looked like he'd fully anticipated both Marquis Halcyon's argument and Queen Lupis's doubts. "Set you up? I can't say I appreciate the implication,

but I guess this really is weak as evidence goes,” Ryoma said with a serene smile. He then turned to Queen Lupis, who still looked confused. “The paper itself doesn’t mean much, but the numbers written on it are important.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“They were calculated by cross-referencing documents collected by a man, who did so out of disgust with the nobles’ corruption, and documents gathered by Count Salzberg’s wife. It’s a transcript of the sum of gold Count Salzberg sent to the nobles every year.”

Queen Lupis tilted her head in confusion, unsure of what Ryoma meant. Of course, she understood what Ryoma said on a basic level, but she didn’t understand why he’d transcribed it onto this scrap of paper.

“Why not submit the documents themselves, then?” she asked.

It went without saying that an original document was much more useful as evidence than a transcript. In modern society, one could use photographs or photocopiers to produce facsimiles of evidence that were perfectly valid, but that wasn’t the case in this world. The only way to copy something was by hand. Be that as it may, this could lead to falsification and human error, so copies weren’t accepted as valid evidence.

With all that in mind, if Ryoma had the original documents for these figures, there was no reason he couldn’t submit them as evidence. In fact, submitting something this absurd just harmed his reliability. But that was all assuming he expected a fair trial.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Ryoma said with a mocking smile and a shrug. He then glared sharply at the nobles.

The most frightening and foul criminals of all were those who maintained a facade of justice. In modern society, that could include officers of the law, public prosecutors, judges involved in legal institutions, and referees in sports. Either way, justice was meaningless unless it could maintain impartiality.

Not that any society out there is completely impartial. I can’t claim to be unbiased either. No one can, Ryoma thought.

It was akin to referees making calls that favored athletes from their country or

hometown. Still, that couldn't be written off as absolutely wrong. People found peace and a sense of unity in being part of a group, and perhaps that was why living in society meant fighting a constant battle against unfairness and partiality. The question was how one faced up to the unfairness. Should one submit to reality and resent its callousness, or should one fight against the partiality and do everything necessary to win?

In the end, what matters is whose justice is stronger—mine or theirs?

Marquis Halcyon was challenging Ryoma to a verbal battle. While no swords would be swung, it was much like real combat; the objective was to make the opponent submit. In battles like this, tarnishing the opponent's honor was exceptionally effective, like exposing their bribery, tax evasion, and other forms of corruption.

"I do not believe the House of Lords is impartial or neutral," Ryoma added. "After all, the House of Lords took sizable bribes to look the other way while Count Salzberg lined his pockets using a salt vein he discovered in the Wortenia Peninsula and mined illegally from for years—even *when the peninsula still belonged to House Rhoadserians*. I couldn't possibly bring such important evidence to this den of corruption, could I now?"

This was the biggest bombshell Ryoma had in his arsenal. The moment Marquis Halcyon heard him say that, his expression, which had remained confident and composed, warped at once.

Judging from his face, he didn't expect me to dig that deep. Well, this is much bigger than just accepting a bribe.

In all developed countries, Japan included, offering and accepting bribes was illegal, but there were still regions in continents like Africa or South America where bribes were a daily occurrence. If this was true in Ryoma's modern world, then it went without saying that it applied to this less advanced world too. Even Marquis Halcyon and the other nobles must have known that accepting bribes was criminal, but since they'd been doing it for many years, no one was blamed for it.

Nevertheless, the fact that they willfully ignored Count Salzberg's misappropriation of the salt vein for years in exchange for those bribes changed

everything. Rhoadserian law dictated that all resources mined from territory belonging to the royal house were to go to the royal family, and breaking that law was a lèse-majesté, a crime punishable by death.

More specifically, there were forests dotting the country that belonged to the royal family. Hunting in them or even chopping the wood for lumber, which was essential for the people's daily lives, was strictly outlawed. With that in mind, appropriating a resource as expensive as a salt vein would merit both a death sentence and the wiping out of one's family, even for major nobles and houses that had existed for as long as the country had.

The question is whether she understands what I'm saying, but she reacted about like I'd expected.

Ryoma turned his eyes to Queen Lupis. Sure enough, what he'd told her hit her like a bolt from the blue, and it was obvious she wasn't sure how to process it.

"Judging from your expression, I'm assuming you had no idea about the salt vein in the Wortenia Peninsula, Your Majesty. I see. Despite it being such a major case of misappropriation, not a single noble reported it to you."

According to Lady Yulia's estimates, the salt vein had generated a revenue of nearly ten thousand gold coins a year for Count Salzberg. Considering that Ryoma was able to squeeze fifty thousand gold coins from Queen Lupis in the name of developing the Wortenia Peninsula, it became clear how large that sum was. And, in this case, the ten thousand gold coins went into the Salzberg county's revenue. Several companies had worked as go-betweens for the count, so the final sum brought in by the salt vein was probably several times larger. The fact the vein was still not depleted made it even more valuable.

If Queen Lupis had known that this salt vein existed, she'd have gone to any lengths to place it under the royal house's control. She needed any source of money she could get her hands on to further her policies.

"And that's why you decided to kill Count Salzberg?" Queen Lupis asked.

"Yes but I had other reasons too. While I don't imagine the House of Lords is likely to believe my claims, I'm curious to know what you think. Do you understand my motives now, Your Majesty?"

That was an extremely uncomfortable question for Queen Lupis, who wanted to use this trial to eliminate Ryoma. Still, his words were convincing, and even she couldn't write them off as mere lies.

"Yes, well... Assuming what you say is true..."

"Thank you kindly, Your Majesty." Ryoma bowed his head reverently to her.

Queen Lupis gave him a terribly sour expression and nodded. She looked aloof on the outside, but she must have been terribly upset. That much was evident from how hard her trembling hands were gripping her seat's armrests.

But is her anger directed at me or at the nobles?

The answer to that question would sway the outcome of this hearing.

Meltina stood next to the queen, watching her with concern. She also knew Queen Lupis's personality very well.

She's definitely conflicted, Meltina thought.

Even from Ryoma's perspective, it was obvious that the queen was backed against the wall. Logically speaking, Ryoma's motivations were understandable and clear-cut. Queen Lupis knew this, and if she had any proper sense for politics, she would have canceled Ryoma's hearing right then and there and thoroughly investigated and denounced the House of Lords' corruption. If nothing else, she should have paused the hearing so Ryoma could submit the documents that would exonerate his name.



Queen Lupis held her tongue as two emotions tugged her heart in different directions. One was her hatred for Ryoma, and the other was her sense of justice as queen. However, Queen Lupis's inner conflict was abruptly disrupted.

"This farce ends here," Marquis Halcyon said, rising from his seat and snapping his fingers.

At his signal, doors on both sides of the room opened, and a group of ten or so knights in full armor filed in, their swords drawn. They silently encircled Ryoma. The air about them indicated that they were prepared to slay Ryoma at Marquis Halcyon's order. Based on the way they carried themselves, these knights were quite skilled and obviously stronger than even the knights standing guard in this room.

Ryoma merely smiled in amusement. "What is this supposed to be?" he asked, not a hint of fear in his voice. "From the crest on their armor, I assume they're knights in service to the House of Lords."

Marquis Halcyon clicked his tongue, a rather rude and disrespectful gesture given that he was in an official setting with the queen present. He was no doubt annoyed by the fact that Ryoma remained completely composed, and he had no intention of answering Ryoma's question.

The queen, on the other hand, couldn't hide her confusion. "Marquis Halcyon, what is the meaning of this?" she asked, her voice full of fear.

"I simply thought there was no need to continue this hearing," he said loudly and calmly. "We could go on, but he will continue insisting that he was in the right. And I'm afraid I haven't the free time to keep arguing with him forever. I wish to see this concluded within the day."

"But...it's worth looking over those documents," Queen Lupis said weakly.

"Are you going to believe this man's claims and bring this trial back to square one? You are this country's queen, Your Majesty, and should you give the royal order to do so, I won't argue against you. But if that happens, we'll need to reconsider how we act around you."

Marquis Halcyon said this with a dark smile, one full of confidence from having occupied a seat of power for many years. He'd already had a minimal

cover-up prepared ahead of time, and while his tone was still that of a reverent vassal, his intentions were crystal clear.

Understanding Marquis Halcyon's implication, Queen Lupis bit her lip. Meltina hurriedly leaned in so no one else would hear her.

"Your Majesty, we should do as Marquis Halcyon says this time."

"But..." Queen Lupis muttered.

"No, we need to take this chance to eliminate him here and now. The allegations of Count Salzberg's misappropriation should be investigated, yes, but that's a separate matter. We can't afford to turn Marquis Halcyon and the other nobles against us."

Meltina knew that the correct course of action would be to pursue the truth, but doing so would result in the House of Lords antagonizing Queen Lupis. That could have repercussions on the entirety of Rhoadseria's aristocracy. The hearing wasn't worth stopping if that was the risk.

More than anything, we need to put an end to this man right here and now, Meltina thought.

Meltina was willing to brave some risks if it meant seeing this plan succeed, and so was Queen Lupis. They were acting to defend their country from Ryoma, and they couldn't make mistakes when they were this close to checkmating him.

Queen Lupis nodded gently, averting her gaze from Meltina and turning her back on her own conscience.

Seeing that their exchange had come to an end, Marquis Halcyon nodded deeply, a hint of relief in his expression. He'd expected this outcome. Like Ryoma suspected, this hearing was a facade made up by the House of Lords and the queen to ensure that he was eliminated. Marquis Halcyon knew as much and was relieved to see the last-minute obstacle resolve itself. He was confident that he'd won.

Seeing the marquis rejoice, Ryoma couldn't help but pity his opponent.

He might be cooperating right now, but this was something of a gamble for

him. That woman is just too unpredictable, I suppose.

Lupis Rhoadserians was kind to a fault, and she had a strong conscience, which was why she always ended up losing her nerve whenever the time came to make a political decision. And Ryoma's words had shaken her heart. Meltina's actions to suppress the queen's doubts and spur her to remain firm in her decision was a show of decisiveness. Ryoma honestly praised Meltina for that.

I guess they've matured too, but that's not unexpected.

When Ryoma first met Meltina Lecter, she was by no means a capable aide to her queen. She was fixed on her knight's ideals of justice with no regard for how other people felt. She was a skilled warrior, and her exceptional loyalty to Queen Lupis made it so no one questioned her place as the queen's close attendant, but that was all she had going for her. As a commander and a leader, she was utterly inept.

During the civil war, she'd tried to persuade Count Bergstone, who was neutral at the time, to turn to the princess's side. She brought up the legitimacy of Lupis's claim to the throne and demanded his loyalty to the crown, but without proposing any recompense for his service. This was enough to illustrate the kind of woman she'd been, but the Meltina Lecter who was only driven by knightly honor and loyalty was gone now.

"Marquis Halcyon..." Meltina rose to her feet and nodded at him. The intent behind her gesture was unmistakable.

Marquis Halcyon noted Meltina's nod. "It appears we've decided. In that case..." He turned to Ryoma with a victorious smile, elated to finally dispose of this troublesome upstart. "All your tricks and your eloquence were in vain, Baron Mikoshiba. The result of your hearing has been decided."

Given Queen Lupis's attitude, the outcome was clear. She has made her decision; she would remove this fearful presence, even if it meant turning a blind eye to injustice and corruption.

"So it seems." Ryoma shrugged indifferently. "It's a pity, really."

Ryoma was blessed with a sharp mind and the ability to read into people's

hearts, so he could tell that appealing to Queen Lupis to turn this around would be wasted effort.

Now that the hearing was concluded in the presence of the queen, Ryoma Mikoshiba was liable for his actions. Of course, a hearing was to decide if there should be a trial. Rhoadserian law dictated that the way he and his house would be dealt with would be decided by the palace at a later date, but this was all just a formality. The House of Lords proposed, and the monarch made the final decision. The verdict they would decide was all but carved in stone. Even so, Ryoma remained unperturbed.

“Hm...” Marquis Halcyon studied Ryoma curiously, noticing his composure. “You don’t look as disappointed as you say. But either way, it’s all decided. No more need for bluffing, is there?” Marquis Halcyon nodded briefly at the knights around Ryoma.

“May I ask what you intend to do next?” Ryoma inquired, tilting his head.

“Well, this is just a hearing. We’ll decide how you and your clan will be punished at a later time. Until we do, you will be held prisoner in the castle’s northern tower. That’s all.”

“You mean the tower for holding prisoners?” Ryoma asked.

Marquis Halcyon gave him an amused smile. “Yes. I see you’re already familiar with that tower.”

“Indeed. They say that once you’re sent there, you never see the light of day again, I believe?”

When nobles were deemed guilty of a crime, as long as it wasn’t severe enough for a death sentence, they were typically ordered to surrender themselves to another noble house. On a surface level, they were prisoners, but they were effectively treated as guests.

The nobility was a privileged class, with many families having blood ties to each other, so other nobles were, in a sense, relatives. Indeed, when a death sentence was handed down, even nobles were restrained. No filial connections could alleviate that, especially if there was a chance they might try to escape their punishment. Then where were those nobles imprisoned?

There were two prisons in Rhoadseria for the nobility. One of them was a tower at the south end of the castle, which was different from a normal prison. One couldn't bring their family or retainers there, but exclusive maids would be appointed to prisoners to look after their daily needs. The food wasn't the finest cuisine available, but the castle's cooks still prepared palatable meals. The outfits weren't extravagant, but they were of good enough quality to retain the nobles' dignity. To those used to living mansions, where all their needs were tended to, it would have felt like they were in hell, but it was basically as accommodating as the average inn. It was less of a prison and more of a guesthouse for VIPs.

But the northern tower is a whole different story.

Ryoma had asked the Igasaki clan to collect information on it, and as it turned out, the northern tower was basically an execution ground. Nobles weren't sent there unless they had committed crimes so atrocious that even the nobility couldn't tolerate them. For example, if a noble killed their house's legitimate heir in order to usurp the headship, they would be sent there. Succession disputes were a day-to-day occurrence for the aristocracy, but even so, they weren't tolerated when it became public knowledge. Blood ties were everything to the nobles, after all. Conversely, this meant that such matters were overlooked so long as they weren't publicly exposed.

Being charged with treason against the kingdom was another case where a noble could be sent to the northern tower. At that point, it didn't matter if the person in question actually sold out the kingdom or not; all that mattered was that they were suspected of treason.

Those two cases had one thing in common: they were intolerable threats to Rhoadseria's order and regime. Very few people were actually sent there, though. Some were executed after an official trial, but the majority of them passed away while incarcerated. No one knew the truth as to how they died, whether it was the prison's unsanitary conditions or a secret execution during torture. The only ones who knew were the House of Lords' top brass, who managed the northern tower.

By the look in Marquis Halcyon's eyes, it was easy to imagine what end he had in store for Ryoma.

“I see,” Ryoma whispered.

“Does it displease you to hear that?” Marquis Halcyon asked, tipping his head to the side. “If anything, I’d like to ask you something. Did you really think you’d be able to absolve yourself here? If so, I’m afraid your reputation as a wise, shrewd man was quite misplaced. If anything, the fact that you walked in here to begin with is laughable. Or what, did you think you’d manage to slip away?”

Marquis Halcyon signaled to the knights surrounding Ryoma. The knights all stood at the ready, prepared to cut him down if he did anything suspicious.

“You might not know this, Baron Mikoshiba, but this room has a thaumaturgical seal on it that impedes the activation of thaumaturgy. One cannot invoke martial or verbal thaumaturgy in this hall. On top of that, the knights outnumber you, and you are unarmed. Now, you being the skilled warrior that you are, you might be thinking of a final act of resistance to escape, but let me warn you now. That is impossible.”

The room did have multiple thaumaturgical seals applied to it. As Marquis Halcyon had said, one impeded the activation of thaumaturgy, making it impossible to transport into this room from the outside, and the other seals increased the walls’ hardness. Even mighty warriors like Robert and Signus were stripped of thaumaturgy here, and for how monstrous their strength was, they were still human.

“Very well, then. As Director of the House of Lords, I declare, under the sanction of Queen Lupis Rhoadserians of Rhoadseria, your actions are unlawful and unjustifiable. Your future punishment will be decided in an official trial, to be set at a later date. Until then, your title and rights as a noble will be suspended, and you will be held in the northern tower.”

At that point, Marquis Halcyon fell silent for a moment and examined everyone’s reactions with a smile.

“Lastly, I have a thought. I’m sure Lord Mikoshiba has things he’d like to tell us, but what say you, gentlemen? It’s not likely we will ever meet this young hero of ours again. Should we take this chance to hear his last words to us?”

All the nobles laughed out loud.

“I see! A fine idea,” one noble said.

“Yes, I think we should hear him out, despite his grandiose delusions, if only to ensure a case like his will never occur again.”

Asking Ryoma for his thoughts wasn't wrong in and of itself, but they were clearly doing it maliciously, out of a desire to mock him. They didn't believe Ryoma would actually answer anything they asked. All they wanted was to humiliate the man who criticized them and ignored their customs. They wanted to hear a defeated man speak of his frustration and anger and laugh at it.

However, though Ryoma only heard sneers and jeers, his attitude didn't change. He merely shrugged.

“I don't have much to say right now, but I think you made a few mistakes, Marquis Halcyon, so I'll take this chance to correct you.”

“Mistakes? Me?” Marquis Halcyon frowned, looking puzzled.

The onlooking nobles reacted much the same. Ryoma paid them no heed and raised an index finger.

“Yes. Here's your first mistake. Even without martial thaumaturgy, at your level, I can still easily kill every single person in this room.”

Saying this, Ryoma walked toward one of the knights holding their sword at the ready. His movements were smooth and natural, neither fast nor slow. Having closed the distance, Ryoma held up his right palm against the knight's armored stomach.

This wasn't a blow, of course. All he did was touch the knight's body. But one thing was out of the ordinary. Just as his palm was about to touch the knight, the knight's large body sank ever so slightly. Everyone who watched, Marquis Halcyon included, only saw Ryoma touch the knight and nothing else, but the next instant, the knight let out a groan and collapsed to the floor, coughing up a startling amount of blood.

Everyone was speechless. It was all too sudden for them to keep up. Indeed, with his large physique, Ryoma could have possibly punched out the knight, but in terms of damage, that wouldn't have achieved much. Even if he'd landed a blow on his armor, it wouldn't have been fatal.

But the reality that just played out before the nobles' eyes proved otherwise. Only one man in the room maintained his composure.

“Oh, pardon. I shouldn't have said ‘easily.’ That was a bit of a lie. I mean, my grandfather could probably slay amateurs like you with one blow. I just don't have his experience, I'm afraid. Either way, his stomach is ruptured, so if you just leave him here or don't get him the right treatment, he's going to die. But I guess I should show him a warrior's compassion and put him out of his misery.”

Saying this, Ryoma scratched his cheek awkwardly, looked at the knight writhing in pain and coughing up blood on the floor, and stomped on the back of his head. He crushed the man's neck—like he'd just squished a bug.

No one could utter a single word. Their minds couldn't understand what had just transpired, their thoughts grinding to a halt. They were like deer, transfixed in place by approaching headlights.

The knights surrounding Ryoma slowly inched away, distancing themselves from him. They could tell on an instinctive level that compared to the man smiling calmly before them, they were nothing but pitiful prey to be devoured.

Ryoma raised another finger. “And, as for your second mistake... You're right in that I don't have my personal sword with me. The bailiff confiscated it. But that doesn't mean I'm unarmed.”

As he finished speaking, three of the knights holding Ryoma in check dropped their swords to the floor and grabbed their faces. Agonized gasps escaped their mouths as blood leaked from between their fingers, dripping to the floor.

“Wh-What is... What's gotten into you?!” Marquis Halcyon called as the knights sank to the floor, groaning.

Ryoma had attacked the knights in some way; that much was obvious. But the marquis had no idea how Ryoma had done it. As far as he and the other nobles could see, Ryoma's body hadn't moved.

Just then, one of the knights hurried over to one of his kneeling comrades and picked something up from the floor. “This is...an iron ball? And the way it's colored... Is this made of gold?” He held up a metallic sphere, roughly the size of a marble.

“There’s one over here too,” another knight said. “And it’s wet with something?”

It wasn’t blood. It was some kind of viscous, transparent fluid. The knights were confused by this fluid, which wasn’t something they often encountered. Sadly, they would never find out what the fluid was.

Ryoma casually approached one of the knights who’d failed to grasp the situation, his right hand dangling at his side. He then swung his arm up, like he was cracking an imaginary whip, from the lower right to the upper left. Its trajectory was that of an upper left slash in fencing.

At this point, the distance between Ryoma and the knight was nearly two meters apart. A sword or a spear would have connected with his opponent, but his bare hands wouldn’t reach their mark. Nevertheless, the moment Ryoma swung his arm, the knight’s skull shattered with a sickening sound. It was like watching a pomegranate rupture.

“What’s more, no one said I only had one weapon on me.”

Ryoma revealed the weapon in his hands—a long chain with counterweights on each end. Its length was just short of a meter, and it looked to be an ordinary chain at first glance. Not many would assume it was a weapon for the simple reason that the chain’s links were rather small. It didn’t look like a boorish weapon, but rather like a refined accessory. The atrocious force it packed, however, was as demonstrated. Its strike was equivalent to being beaten with a war hammer.



“What is that?!” Count Hamilton shouted, kicking his chair as he got to his feet. “Where did you get that?! You were stripped of all your weapons before coming here!”

His surprise and anger only made sense; he was charged with the House of Lords’ security, and the failure of his subordinates reflected on him. Be that as it may, his responsibility in this was no matter when his life was presently in danger.

“Yes, I was disarmed and was even subjected to a body check afterward.” Ryoma shrugged. “I suppose the ones doing the check didn’t see this chain as a weapon.”

When Ryoma marched into the House of Lords, which was effectively enemy territory, he’d already taken every possible precaution. One such preparation was ensuring that he always had some means of protecting himself.

Not bad. And the endowed thaumaturgy seems to be working properly.

Ryoma had known ahead of time that no one but the knights working in the House of Lords were allowed to bring in weapons, so he’d crafted a few countermeasures for that. For instance, earlier he’d used a weapon called a finger projectile—a hidden weapon used in Chinese martial arts—to shoot through a knight’s eye. The spherical projectiles were hidden on a bracelet on his right hand. In other words, they were beads on a rosary. Such rosaries weren’t typically worn by men in this world, but since it was fashioned out of gold, the ones conducting the body check had assumed it was an ornament.

If I were to say I got it from an eastern-continent merchant, no bailiff without a noble title would be able to confiscate it. Conversely, the fact they put me through a body check at all was pretty dangerous for them.

The bailiffs must have known, on some level, what the House of Lords’ top brass had planned for Ryoma. Nevertheless, they were dealing with a national hero, so the prospect of provoking him too much had been frightening. Indeed, it was difficult to forbid a noble from bringing in ornaments like this. Even if they were to follow regulations and forcibly confiscate them, it could cause them trouble later down the line. After all, nobles were given preferential treatment. Of course, as security for the House of Lords, the right thing to do

would be to confiscate such ornaments, but to do so in this situation, the bailiffs needed guarantees that the House of Lords would protect them from the nobles' retribution.

This wasn't unlike how police officers in Ryoma's world had to be cautious with using their firearms. It was part of their job, but the mass media and citizens' groups could blame them for using excessive force, prompting the police's top brass to issue an official apology. Most of the time, improper use of their firearm ended in demotions or a lowered merit rating, but some officers had been forced to resign or dismissed for disciplinary reasons. Some cases were even treated as criminal offenses. Police officers in Japan were only allowed to fire their weapons in emergencies where their own or a third party's life was in danger, but faced with such an extreme life-or-death scenario, they had to bear the risk of a demotion or a dismissal.

In this world, on the other hand, mistakes on the job weren't written off with just a dismissal or a demotion. One's life hung in the balance, and not just their lives, but the lives of their families and loved ones. The gulf between the nobility and the commoners was that vast, and even within the aristocracy, there was a difference between having noble blood and holding a noble title.

As far as Ryoma knew, none of the bailiffs held noble titles, but assuming they wouldn't confiscate these things was still a gamble. Maybe that vigilance would have earned them some kind of compensation from Count Hamilton, but what would happen if the count hadn't offered any? The brutal conclusion would have been beyond description. No one was so loyal to their work that they would brave that much danger for it.

In the end, if a workplace won't protect their subordinates, those subordinates will run to defend themselves. People are all the same, even in this world. Still, I can't assume something like that absolutely wouldn't happen.

For how selfish and self-serving people could be, they would sometimes risk their lives for justice and their responsibilities. Realistically speaking, though, cases like that were few and far between, which was why they made such impressive tales.

With this thought in mind, Ryoma increased the speed with which he spun his

weighted chain. The whistling sound of it cutting through air filled the room.

This feels right. There's always a difference between training and real combat, so I was a bit concerned, but it looks like there won't be any problems.

Marquis Halcyon didn't know this, but for a hidden weapon, a weighted chain was quite long. All the same, since each link was small, it could be folded up and carried in one hand, making it both compact and easy to spin. This also meant it was lightweight.

These were major advantages for a hidden weapon—by design, they were made to be difficult to detect so as to catch the enemy by surprise—but their disadvantage was their lack of lethal force. Swords were much more effective for killing, so many hidden weapons employed poison in an attempt to increase their lethality.

To that end, no matter how shaken the knights were by Ryoma's words, a normal weighted chain would not have been able to smash a knight's skull through his helmet with such ease. The one Ryoma wielded, however, compensated for its lack of lethal force by other means.

I'm sure my many specifications for making this put Nelcius through a great deal of trouble, but it was worth it.

Holding the chain in his hands, it certainly felt like it packed sufficient weight as a blunt weapon. By consuming Ryoma's willpower and prana, it reached a maximal weight that was, at most, twenty times its original weight. Needless to say, this was thanks to the endowed thaumaturgy applied by the Wortenia Peninsula's dark elves.

"So, what are you going to do?" Ryoma asked as he paced toward Marquis Halcyon and the other nobles. "It looks to me like you're getting cold feet here, but don't tell me you actually expected me to go along with your orders."

Ryoma advanced with a monarch's stride. Something overflowing from his body overwhelmed the people around him, leaving them awestruck.

Marquis Halcyon, who'd frozen in place from terror, suddenly lashed out as Ryoma approached him. "Wh-What are you doing, you fools?! Kill him! Kill this man!" he shouted hysterically—an unsightly scream completely devoid of the

composure he'd had just minutes ago. No one mocked Marquis Halcyon for it, though; the other members of the House of Lords all felt the same way.

Nonetheless, the knights showed no signs of obeying the marquis. They might have wanted to obey, but their bodies simply refused to move.

"Get away! Get some distance from him and regroup!" one of the knights called out, aiming his sword at Ryoma.

Perhaps spurred by his sense of duty and purpose, the knight stepped forward, but the next instant, his face caved in with a dull wallop. He crumbled and clattered to the floor, his gaze fixed upward.

One by one, the remaining knights met the same end, blood and flesh spurting from their bodies. The counterweighted chain whirred as it spun through the air, its movements almost performative in their gracefulness.

The counterweights spun in a small circle around Ryoma, forming a barrier of sorts. A perfect balance of attack and defense, it created a typhoon made of human malice, and any who dared enter the typhoon's range would meet the same gruesome end. That didn't mean that staying outside its range ensured one's safety, though. The typhoon could easily change its range in accordance with Ryoma's wishes. At times it wasn't a spherical barrier at all; Ryoma could launch it like an arrow through his opponents.

"Damn monster..." someone muttered.

Those two words embodied what everyone in the room, besides Ryoma, was thinking. Their complete superiority over Ryoma had been spectacularly overturned, and the House of Lords' nobles all shuddered in fear.

They had assumed Ryoma would resist to some extent, but they'd figured it would have all been weak, laughable, and in vain. He was a so-called "national hero" and a famous warrior, so some resistance was to be expected, but that was exactly why they'd used this room, which prevented the use of thaumaturgy. This was why he'd been subjected to a rigorous body check, although most nobles were not. Yet despite all their assumptions and planning, they hadn't expected him to resort to such brutal force.

It was then that Marquis Halcyon's eyes turned to the sentries standing

against the wall.

“Dammit! What are you just standing there for?! Stop this man! Stop him!”

Marquis Halcyon’s anger was understandable, considering that he couldn’t have the sentries merely stare at Ryoma slack-jawed, no matter how unexpected Ryoma’s actions were. But even though Marquis Halcyon barked orders at them, the sentries didn’t budge. They remained there, standing at attention. One almost had to wonder if they were wax dolls.

“What’s wrong with you?! The marquis gave you an order! Are you deaf?!” cried a noble who’d watched in silence so far. He got to his feet, outraged, and grabbed one of the nearby sentries menacingly. “What are you just standing there for?! Hurry up and stop him!”

For all the noble was concerned, the marquis had issued an order. The other nobles in the room likely felt the same way, but all their expectations were betrayed in a most unexpected manner.

“Your voice is so irritating.”

The words had leaked from Ryoma’s lips, but it wasn’t apparent to whom he was whispering. In less than a second, the head of the noble grabbing the sentry went flying through the air.

“Wh-What?!” one of the onlooking nobles exclaimed.

They watched in disbelief as one of their own fell to the ground, dead and bereft of their head. Standing beside him was the sentry he’d grabbed onto, and the bloodstained sword the sentry gripped in his hand told the story of what had just transpired.

Though it was obvious what had happened, the reality of it wasn’t any clearer. This was more shocking than the brutal murders Ryoma had committed earlier. After all, the sentries standing at the walls were on the nobles’ side, yet one of them had killed a member of the House of Lords, so they couldn’t grasp the situation.

On top of that, fear for their own lives was now brewing in their hearts. They were faced with a demon who cared nothing for their status as nobles, and the ones who were supposed to defend them stood still as statues.

Reveling in their fear and confusion, Ryoma laughed loudly. “Oh, this is amusing. Seeing the way arrogant men like you go from being confident that you’re at the top of the world to having your hopes crushed to dust.”

Ryoma raised his left hand high in the air, showing it off to the nobles. With that signal, the sentries near the wall drew their swords. This alone was proof that they obeyed Ryoma’s orders, which demonstrated just how far Ryoma had gone to actualize his resistance.

Did he bribe them? Blackmail them? No, that’s not what’s most important here. This man, he’s really going to betray Rhoadseria!

The second Marquis Halcyon arrived at this conclusion, he felt something cold run down his back. The other nobles came to the same conclusion too.

“You curs... You wouldn’t...”

“The damn upstart is thinking of...”

The answer to that question went without saying, but no one could bring themselves to finish that sentence. The nobles then screamed in anger, many of them prepared for what was to come. While they were human trash, they were no fools. They’d received the finest education in this world, and maintained their might as the select few to serve as members of the House of Lords. They knew that raising their voices was meaningless now, but their pride as nobles wouldn’t let them acknowledge that fact.

Ryoma then lowered his hand, as if swinging the blade of judgment down upon them.

As the nobles kicked their chairs away and attempted to flee, the sentries thrust their swords into their backs. The nobles had some combat experience, and they tried to snatch the sentries’ swords and fight back, but they were cut down and sank lifelessly to the floor.

As this took place, Marquis Halcyon prioritized his survival. He ran off in an attempt to protect himself. He was headed for the door to the adjacent room, where Queen Lupis had waited before entering this hall, but just as he was meters away from it, his path was blocked and he was pressed against the wall.

“Lady Lecter! Do something to stop that man! That...monster!” Marquis

Halcyon yelled, seeing Meltina standing faithfully at Queen Lupis's side.

The marquis was already surrounded by sentries with their blades drawn, but for all his cries for help, Meltina didn't so much as flinch. All she could do was protect her liege, who was shivering in terror at the atrocity Ryoma had enacted.

"Now, let's end this," Ryoma declared. "Kill them."

The next moment, countless swords gouged into Marquis Halcyon's body.

Nobles and knights lay lifeless on the hearing room's floor. Some were missing their heads, while others were missing chunks of their chests. The ways they'd perished were different, but they all shared the same outcome.

The only ones still alive were the man behind this tragedy and the Igasaki clan members who were disguised as the sentries. And in the corner of the room was the sound of labored breathing—the breathing of the highest-ranking person to survive this brutality, Queen Lupis.

The storm of violence she'd just witnessed had likely scarred her heart and mind. The way she was holding on to Meltina, who stood nestled against her, and refusing to let go spoke to her mental state.

They call her a princess general, but she doesn't carry out the true horrors of the battlefield. If anything, the fact that she's not running and screaming means she's calmer than I expected.

Ryoma had no intention of disposing of Lupis Rhoadserians at this point, but they had no way of knowing that. The fact that Ryoma had rebelled so openly against the Kingdom of Rhoadseria made it seem like there was no reason he wouldn't kill Queen Lupis right here, right now.

Ryoma was a fair man, but he was merciless to those who bared their fangs at him. Queen Lupis and Meltina knew this about him, so they naturally feared for their lives. Yet despite this, they didn't try to run, nor did they criticize Ryoma for his actions.

Ryoma found this quite unusual. He was surprised that Meltina Lecter hadn't drawn her sword and tried to attack him, even if she knew that doing so would put her queen in danger. If she was wise enough to understand that and not

attack him, he'd expected her to at least hurl an insult or two.

So she's not doing it, because she knows it's pointless. I guess she's matured a little, in the end? Or maybe...

Unfortunately, he had no time to pursue this doubt.

"Well, now that we're done cleaning up the trash, I think it's about time we leave this place," Ryoma said as he wound the counterweighted chain around his arms. "From the looks of things, I doubt you're in the state of mind for peaceful conversation."

He bowed deeply to Queen Lupis—a perfect, exemplary bow that would shame no noble—then raised his head and flashed her a provocative smile.

"Now then, Your Majesty. I look forward to the next time we meet."

While his court mannerisms were perfect, his words were a declaration of war. He'd told her to her face that the next time they met would be when they locked blades on the battlefield.

Ryoma turned around and walked out of the hall. The Igasaki clan members disguised as sentries followed him like shadows. The sight of him leaving was the very image of a new conqueror's march.

Queen Lupis could only watch his departure. From her perspective, all she wanted was for him to get away from her as soon as humanly possible. Upon confirming that Ryoma and the sentries had left, she let out a deep breath, all the stress draining from her body.

Seeing her liege like this, Meltina embraced her. "Your Majesty, rest easy."

"Meltina... I'm sorry..." Queen Lupis muttered, looking up at her with tears in her eyes.

Her tears were neither from the fear of losing her life nor from the relief at the threat being gone. Her tears were ones of guilt. Meltina had told her not to come here today, but she'd insisted on having her way, placing both herself and Meltina in harm's way.

Meltina shook her head. "No, Your Majesty. You have nothing to worry about."

“But...our collaborator, Marquis Halcyon... This means...” Queen Lupis whispered, looking at the corpses piled up around them.

The House of Lords, the most prominent members of the nobles’ faction, were now dead. They weren’t Queen Lupis’s subordinates, but they were influential collaborators in this incident. It only made sense that she would be wary of what was to come with them dead.

Meltina, however, smiled. She didn’t think there was any reason to panic.

“True, Marquis Halcyon’s death is a painful blow, but after this atrocity, all the nobles who haven’t declared their stances with regards to that man will grow to hate him all the more. Of course, some might join his side, but the majority of them will loathe him for it. In other words, Rhoadseria will be divided between those on your side and those under his banner.”

“But that...that would bring a conflict bigger than the civil war,” Queen Lupis murmured fearfully.

Meltina nodded. “Yes. In all likelihood, this war will be much bigger than the civil war. It will be a great war, with Rhoadseria’s survival hanging in the balance.”

All the color drained from Queen Lupis’s face. If such a war were to break out, the conflict would ravage the land, and the commoners would get caught in the cross fire.

Meltina had predicted Queen Lupis’s terrified reaction. “You have nothing to worry about, Your Majesty,” she assured her liege. “If anything, this is a chance. A perfect chance for you to seize the initiative.”

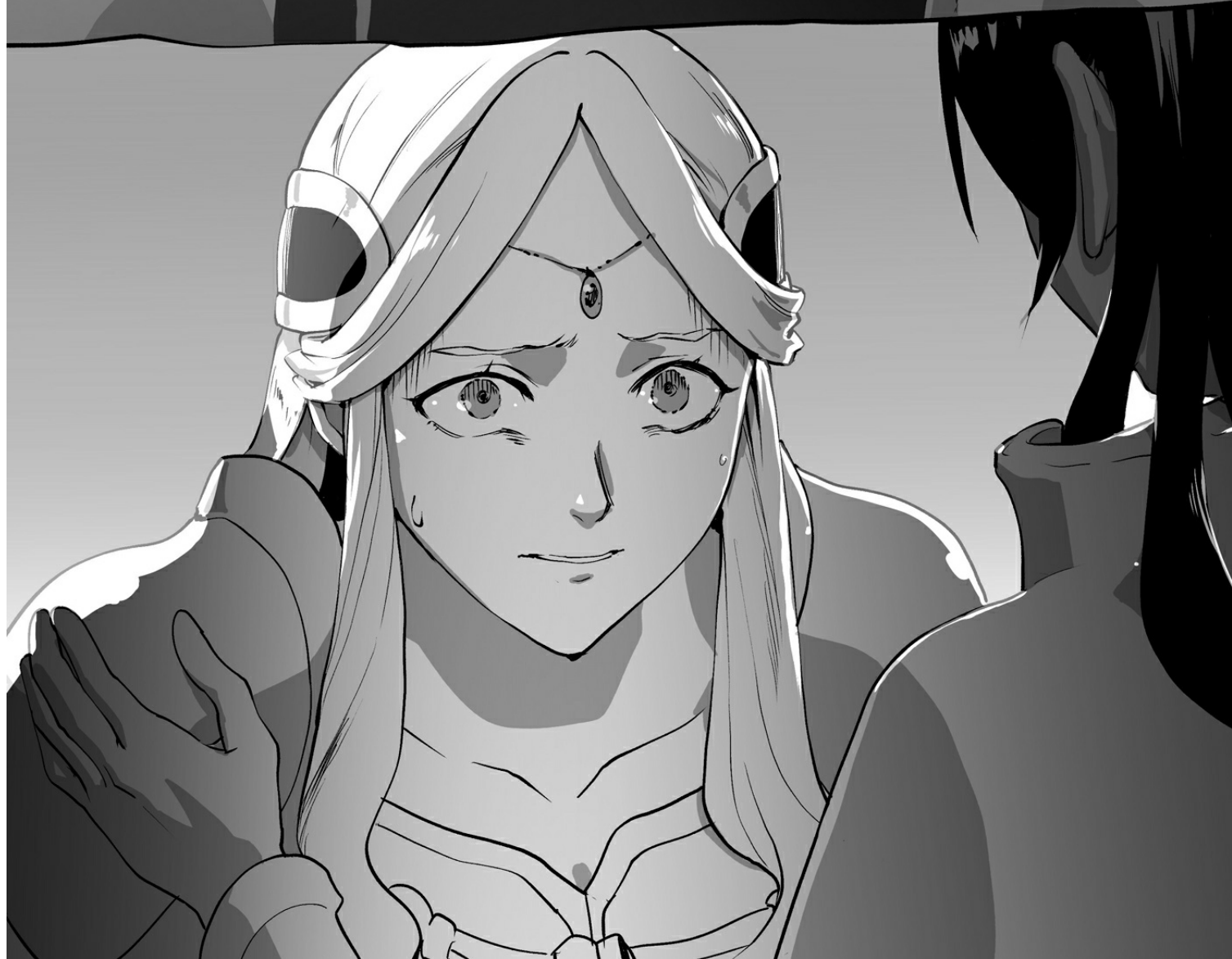
Queen Lupis stared at her, confused.

“We must return to the palace right away and declare that he is a traitor. We’ll then issue a manifesto, calling for the organization of an expedition force to eliminate the traitor.”

“You’re saying we should...take the initiative and strike first?” Queen Lupis asked. “But, it’s him we’re dealing with here. I’m sure he’s calculated how we’ll act and made his own plans.”

“Yes, but with this, we can turn all the indecisive nobles against him. And now that most of the key figures of the nobles’ faction are dead, it’ll be easier for you to take charge of the situation.”

“You...” Queen Lupis felt the breath catch in her throat. “Did you...predict this...?”



The queen's eyes settled on Marquis Halcyon's dead body lying on the floor. She then looked at Meltina, her eyes accusing and reproachful. Yes, she had clashed with the nobles over government affairs, but she had allied with them concerning this matter, even if only temporarily. She couldn't tolerate the idea of planning things around the death of these allies.

Despite Queen Lupis's accusatory stare, Meltina seemed perfectly calm. "Not at all. I wouldn't plan something like this."

Meltina denied the idea, but the dark smile that momentarily flashed on her lips told the entire story. It rendered the queen completely speechless.

Queen Lupis understood that Meltina was right. Because the nobles had held on to their local authority, Queen Lupis had never really been the ruler of this country in the truest sense of the word. Winning the civil war had earned her the crown, but in truth, she was neither a monarch nor a tyrant. She was a supervisor who struggled to keep her subordinates under control.

In that regard, it was by no means bad news for her that the selfish, self-serving nobles who'd made light of and looked down upon her were gone. While it would be difficult to take command of the other nobles when they were so blind with rage and a desire for revenge, they would definitely remain fixated on Ryoma Mikoshiba until they'd conquered the Wortenia Peninsula.

That much was fact, and Meltina's suggestion was a good decision overall, but it was also too calculating and self-serving. Queen Lupis didn't know Meltina to be this kind of woman. What's more, she didn't know Meltina to be this good at adapting to the situation. Meltina wasn't incompetent, but she was impulsive and imprudent, so watching her propose such a precise countermeasure on the spot was strange in and of itself.

I know Meltina's matured over the years, but...

Meltina was currently charged with managing Rhoadseria's public order. If one wanted to be optimistic, they could assume that Meltina had grown exponentially due to this role, but viewed with a healthy dose of pessimism, the answer took a much darker turn.

So she knew this was going to happen? Or she at least considered it as a

possibility?

Meltina had either thought of it on her own or someone had given her the idea. The real issue, though, was that Meltina hadn't told Queen Lupis.

Meltina... Not you too...

This thought wiped away any terror Queen Lupis held for Ryoma. She understood why Meltina hadn't told her about this possibility; it was because she wasn't one hundred percent sure it would happen. Queen Lupis could tell that much from how Meltina had reacted to the incident, and it was evidently why Meltina hadn't refused her queen's wishes.

If she knew this was going to happen for sure, she would have definitely stopped him. Even though it was my choice to come here...

An indescribable sense of loss gripped Queen Lupis's heart. She couldn't quite understand what it was, but it felt like she had just lost something very precious.

Meltina had no way of knowing what her queen was feeling. "Besides, we had no way of knowing whether another rebellion might break out," Meltina whispered softly as she gazed at the door like she was gazing at prey in the distance.



The corridor seemed to extend into the darkness. The air was thick with the smell of dust and mold, indicating that it hadn't been used in a long time. The sound of countless footsteps bounced off the stone walls and floors as Douglas Hamilton led the group as a guide. Ryoma Mikoshiba followed him, protected by the Igasaki clan members disguised as knights. They'd already walked several kilometers, using a torch to light their way, but even with their bodies reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, this was still a long trek.



This corridor had been built during Rhoadseria's founding as an escape route for the royalty and nobility in case the castle was attacked. It was an underground tunnel that led from the House of Lords to the forest north of the capital.

"We should be there soon," Douglas said, turning around to look at them, his expression strained. After having been driven past the point of no return, he had no choice but to obey Ryoma.

I guess it's still not easy for him to just accept that, though.

Douglas had waited for Ryoma outside the hearing hall's door to lead him to the escape tunnel, meaning that he'd witnessed the bloody tragedy that had taken place. The image had been seared into his mind, but he hadn't stepped into the room and confirmed the corpses one by one. He'd merely caught a glimpse of it when Ryoma came out. Nevertheless, as a mere bailiff, the sight of his colleagues' and his superiors' dead bodies must have been a shock to him.

Still, it's not as important as his daughter's life.

Douglas Hamilton was a textbook example of someone who accepted bribes, but that didn't mean he was scum completely bereft of human empathy. He simply needed more money than his position in the House of Lords afforded him. His daughter was afflicted with an incurable disease, so he needed funds to extend her life and was willing to stoop to any low to obtain them. That was all there was to it. That was why he'd taken Ryoma's deal.

Even if it meant giving up his pride and glory as a noble. That's some impressive resolve, in a sense.

Douglas cast everything away for his daughter's sake. That was easier said than done; few people would truly go that far. The intent of their actions aside, people like that could be useful.

As that thought crossed Ryoma's mind, Douglas stopped in his tracks. It appeared that they had reached a dead end.

"It's this way. Wait a moment," Douglas said and approached a pillar to the right.

He operated something on the pillar, then the wall that blocked their path forward noisily parted to the left and right, opening to reveal a path ahead. They climbed up the staircase for what felt like a hundred or so steps before running into another dead end. Hamilton then operated another contraption, which opened another passage in the wall.

“Oh, I see. This path connects to a cave in the forest,” Ryoma noted.

The exit led into a natural cave of moderate size. The cave extended for a few dozen meters, after which they stepped out into sunlight.

“Master Ryoma, we’ve been waiting for you,” said Laura and Sara. They had changed out of their usual maid outfits and had instead donned leather armor, like they were prepared for battle.



“I see you made it out of the capital safely,” Ryoma said as he walked toward the exit. “So, were there any problems?”

Ryoma had prepared everything meticulously, but there were no absolutes in life, and nothing mattered more than a constant supply of information, especially at times like this, when the situation was changing by the minute.

“Lione has the soldiers on standby outside the cave, as planned,” Laura replied promptly. “Lady Salzberg has already escaped the capital and is headed east.”

The shortest path to the Wortenia Peninsula from the capital was to go straight northeast, but of course, the enemy was well aware of that. Instead, all the noncombatants—like Lady Yulia, the maids, and the cooks—had boarded a Christof Company carriage that would take them to the Kingdom of Myest, where they’d sail into Sirius.

“I see. What about the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph?”

“They’ve already vacated their domains and taken their families north.”

“And what about their guards?”

“Sir Ryuusai and Lady Oume are guarding them from the shadows, and they have Lady Dilphina’s unit backing them up as well. They should be fine.”

Ryoma nodded.

Count Bergstone’s and Count Zeleph’s domains weren’t particularly large, but their vicinity to the capital was proof that the kingdom had trusted the two houses. However, if they were to break away from Rhoadseria, this advantage became a disadvantage.

It’s only a temporary affair, but it’s still impressive that they decided to do this.

These were the lands they’d governed carefully for many years. Leaving them behind to join a nascent faction required a great deal of resolve. After all, they stood to gain if Ryoma won this war, but if he lost, they would lose everything. The only thing that would remain to their names would be the dirty label of foolish traitors who tried to sell out their country. But Count Bergstone and his

party had decided to bet everything they had on Ryoma's success nonetheless.

"Yo, boy. From the looks of things, everything went according to plan."

When Ryoma left the cave, Lione spotted him and gave him a friendly tap on the shoulder. She treated him like one might treat a friend from school, but no one found fault with it. Ryoma liked that she treated him this way.

"Yeah. For the time being, anyway," he replied, accepting the leather armor Sara handed him. He put it on, then climbed onto a horse prepared for him.

Their objective was the Cannat Plains, located half a day's ride to the northeast of the capital. There, they would regroup with an army led by Helena Steiner under the pretext of a regular exercise.

Unfortunately, Ryoma had no way of knowing what would happen when he got there...

Chapter 4: The Battle of the Cannat Plains

The Cannat Plains was a strip of flatland located past the northeastern highway from the capital and was under the royal family's direct control. With the boon of the Bronze River, which wound across the mountain range that ran along the border with Xarooda, it was a fertile, productive land, albeit not as vast as the grain-producing regions in Rhoadseria's south. It would take several days to cross the plains by foot from its west to its east, but less than a day to walk from its south to its north.

Ryoma was currently in a tent he'd set up in the Cannat Plains. His expression was severe and his brow was furrowed as he gazed at the maps on the desk. Lione and the others stood around him, their expressions as grave as his, indicating the severity of the situation.

"Well? Any word from the scouts yet?" Ryoma asked, to which Sara shook her head.

He'd asked this question several times already, and four times over the last ten minutes. His impatience was natural; Helena was scheduled to regroup with them, but the allotted time had long since passed.

I did account for delays in my schedule, but still, she's late. Too late.

Three days had passed since Ryoma escaped Pireas and reached the Cannat Plains, and the impatience was starting to eat away at him. Since Counts Bergstone and Zeleph had sworn their loyalty to him, Ryoma was hoping to transport them and their families to Sirius. They were about to oppose Queen Lupis directly from now on, so it was necessary he secured their and their families' safety. Of course, Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War was included as well.

In truth, Helena's situation wasn't as dire as the counts'. They were too close to Ryoma, after all. While they'd sworn fealty to him only recently, they'd been under the Mikoshiba barony's umbrella, or at least in a cooperative relationship with it, ever since the conclusion of the civil war.

In addition, they were too capable for Queen Lupis's regime, one where the sovereign held power. A sword that was too sharp must be handled with skill and care. If one failed to do so, it would become a dangerous weapon that threatened themselves more than anything.

Even if the counts hadn't sided with Ryoma, Queen Lupis would have suspected them and their actions. Then, overcome with doubt and distrust, she would have eventually elected to expel them altogether. That much was obvious to Count Bergstone and Count Zeleph, which was why Ryoma had to ensure their families' safety.

More than anything, however, Ryoma wanted to ensure Helena's safety.

Is it strange that I feel this way?

Helena was a highly capable woman and a powerful ally, but Ryoma couldn't help but feel that there was more to their relationship than just that. His desire to keep her safe felt more like a feeling one harbored for their family or friends. It was similar to how he felt about Laura and Sara.

It's possible she got the meetup spot wrong, but...

Communication in this world was limited, and keeping in touch with others was a constant concern. There were no phones with GPS tracking, nor any landline phones, which made it virtually impossible to confirm someone's position in real time. Nonetheless, they were on the plains without anything obstructing them from sight. Unless Helena greatly missed their meetup spot, she should have been able to find them.

Which means that, possibly...

A few ominous theories crossed Ryoma's mind. The first was that something unexpected had happened to Helena. Helena was set to gather her most trusted subordinates and regroup with Ryoma, so perhaps one of her subordinates had heard her plan to defect and rebelled against her.

That doesn't sound too likely, though.

In order to defend against the O'ltromea Empire invading Xarooda again, Helena was stationed in a border city with a garrison of five thousand men. This time, she was to choose a thousand loyal to her from among that garrison.

So long as Chris is serving as her right hand, we'd have heard something by now if some kind of delay happened.

Ryoma held Chris Morgan in high regard, but not as a powerful warrior who could cut through enemy lines, like Robert and Signus. Ryoma knew that Chris's skills with a spear were exceptional and that he was among Rhoadseria's most talented warriors, but his years of mistreatment by General Albrecht meant he lacked the Twin Blades' combat experience.

Chris's true value lay not in his strength as a warrior, but in his political prowess and leadership skills—his ability to command and maintain unity in an army. Both were exceedingly important for keeping other people under one's control. Indeed, during the last civil war, Helena had managed to convince many of the knights' faction to turn from General Albrecht's side to hers, and she could have only achieved that with Chris's assistance. Helena herself had admitted that.

Chris's value lay not in his strength as a vanguard fighting on the front lines, but in his martial expertise and leadership savvy. He was a talented commander on all fronts, and because of that, he was valuable to Helena as her right-hand man. What's more, Chris's loyalty lay more with Helena as a person than with Rhoadseria as a country. A man like that wouldn't betray her. If anything unexpected had happened, they wouldn't have neglected to send Ryoma a messenger.

It's possible they did and they all got silenced, but more probable than that...

As another possibility crossed Ryoma's mind, they heard noise coming from outside the tent, then an Igasaki ninja they'd sent out to scout hurried inside and whispered into Ryoma's ear.

Sara and Laura saw Ryoma's expression stiffen and realized the severity of the report.

"Understood. Bring him in," Ryoma ordered.

The ninja nodded briefly, turned around, and left. Before long, another man was escorted into the tent. All eyes fixed on him.

No dirt or injuries to speak of. Yeah, that just about settles it.

Seeing that the man's attire was practically pristine, Ryoma was able to affirm that his grim suspicion was right, yet he spoke to the man as calmly as he could.

"It's been a while, Sir Chris."

"Yes, quite some time, Baron Mikoshiba," Chris replied, but his expression was as hard as steel. He wasn't masking any bloodlust or enmity, but it was clear it had taken Chris a great deal of courage to come here.

The two looked at each other wordlessly for a few seconds, and the air in the tent froze with suspense. Eventually, Ryoma let out a loud sigh.

"I see... So that's what happened, and that's why you came."

There was no need to explain why Chris was here. The fact that Helena's army wasn't at the meetup spot and that Chris came alone with his clothes undisturbed made his business here self-evident.

"Yes. Lady Helena wished to come herself, but I stopped her," Chris said, bowing his head deeply to Ryoma. He then reached into his pocket, took out a letter, and presented it to Ryoma. "It's a letter from Lady Helena. Please read it."

"Of course. Thank you for going to the trouble of delivering it." Ryoma took the letter from Chris and studied the wax seal on it.

It's the same emblem I saw on the other letters Helena sent me, so it's unlikely it's a fake.

Although his mind already knew the answer, his heart couldn't help but deny it. Realizing this, Ryoma cracked a self-deprecating smile. He ripped the wax seal off and scanned the letter inside. The contents were straightforward and succinct, but Ryoma had to read it a few times. He then looked at Chris and spoke slowly.

"I've read the letter, and I acknowledge its contents."

"Thank you, and I'm sorry. So...?" Chris asked hesitantly. He probably wasn't expecting Ryoma's response to be as restrained as it was.

In contrast to Chris, Ryoma was perfectly calm. "I don't have time to write a reply. Is it necessary?"

Chris shook his head. Given Ryoma's position, he didn't have time to compose a response, and Chris didn't assume he'd have to deliver one. All the same, Ryoma carried on without regard for Chris's shaken attitude.

"Give her my response verbally, then. Tell her I look forward to the day we meet again."

Chris's face washed over with surprise. He realized what Ryoma was saying, and he hung his head deeply.

"Understood. I will deliver your message, on my honor as a knight."

Helena's letter was a farewell to Ryoma, which meant that she, Helena Steiner, would become Ryoma's enemy.

This was the moment the cogs began to move. Allowing the messenger to live was a gesture of respect in this world, but during a war, such niceties weren't always upheld. Ryoma, however, seemed willing to let the traitor's subordinate leave safely.

"I will take my leave, then. May we meet again, someday..." Chris bowed his head again to Ryoma, who then escorted Chris out of the tent.

Ryoma nodded. "Yes, someday..."

Chris rode off on his horse toward the capital, and Ryoma watched wordlessly as the knight disappeared into the distance.

Lione, who'd held her tongue so far, called out from behind him, "Boy, are ya sure we should've let him go? Helena's turned against us, right? She's tricky enough on her own."

Ryoma was the only one who'd read Helena's letter, but based on his exchange with Chris, everyone present had caught on to its contents. Most of them, like Lione, were apprehensive about Ryoma's choice to let Chris go. Laura and Sara were the only ones who didn't doubt Ryoma's decision.

"Disposing of him now would be the correct choice, in the sense that it weakens the enemy's forces," Laura said.

"If Laura and I were to attack," Sara added, "we would almost surely beat him. And with everyone present here, including Master Ryoma, we'd absolutely

overcome him.”

Robert and Signus both nodded. All Ryoma had to do was give the signal, and the two of them would move in to attack.

“But if we’d attacked him here, Chris wouldn’t have gone down without a fight,” Laura stated. “He didn’t have his spear, but he’s a skilled warrior even without it. We would have at least gotten hurt trying to kill him.”

“Yes. If nothing else, killing him now, when the enemy’s movements are still uncertain...” Sara trailed off.

The others groaned in understanding. The fact that Helena had defected to the enemy’s side meant things had changed considerably. If this were a game of chess, Chris would be a bishop or knight stranded on the enemy’s side of the board. Normally, it would have made sense to take him, but doing so could have left their side open to an attack by another bishop or a rook. Therefore, they couldn’t take that risk.

“Also,” Laura began, “I believe Master Ryoma meant...”

Everyone looked to Ryoma, who neither denied nor confirmed what the Malfist sisters had said.

“I see,” Lione murmured.

In the mercenary life, someone could be a friend one day and an enemy the next. Yet it wasn’t too late to investigate why Helena had turned her back on Ryoma, now of all times, and decide what to do next.

Suddenly, Kikoku let out a resonant screech, like it was trying to warn Ryoma of something.

What happened?!

Kikoku had warned Ryoma in the past, but right now they were in an open field with no enemies in sight. Even if soldiers were lying in wait to ambush them, it was doubtful they could break through Ryoma’s defensive perimeter undetected.

Be that as it may, Ryoma abided by his survival instincts and activated the fourth chakra, the Anahata chakra located in his chest, triggering his martial

thaumaturgy. Doing so ended up saving his life too, because the next second, an intense shock wave blasted into Ryoma's abdomen.

The pain felt like someone had thrust a stake into his body, and Ryoma coughed up the blood surging into his mouth. An instant later, a thunderous rumbling from afar reached his ears. The sound of the blast coming so long after its impact could only mean one thing.

The Malfist sisters noticed that something had happened and immediately threw themselves over Ryoma's body, shielding him.

"Boy!"

Lione hurried over to Ryoma, while Robert and Signus ordered the nearby troops to scout the area for the attackers. Soldiers carrying shields swiftly surrounded Ryoma, preparing for another surprise attack. No one could hide their confusion at this sudden occurrence. Even so, under the Twin Blades' capable command, their confusion soon died down.

Unaware of all this, Ryoma was trying to think through the agonizing pain in an attempt to make sense of what had just happened.

I was careless. I didn't think this world had long-distance sniping. Dammit... The martial thaumaturgy and the armor made from monster materials kept me from dying, but the force of that shot was absurd.

Ryoma was no military enthusiast, but he had an above-average knowledge of guns, since his grandfather's training had included countermeasures against firearms. When a bullet hit a bulletproof vest, it could protect against direct penetration, but it didn't protect from the kinetic energy of the shot. It would reduce it somewhat, but not even Type IV body armor, worn by American soldiers and considered top-rank equipment, completely absorbed the impact. Also, the force could still damage internal organs and cause bone fractures. Even in modern society, one would need an ambulance.

I'll have to thank Nelcius. Endowed thaumaturgy that triggers automatically upon impact...

Most clothes in this world were made of linen or cotton, while the wealthy wore clothes of silk. The only difference between here and Ryoma's world was

that this world didn't have synthetic fiber. There were other factors that set the two worlds apart, though, like the existence of powerful life-forms called monsters, from which one could gather materials, and thaumaturgy. The leather armor he'd received from the Malfist sisters when they escaped the House of Lords had both.

On the surface, it looked like ordinary leather armor—meticulously made but otherwise no different from what one could purchase in any city. However, any warrior who knew the true powers of this armor would greedily seek it out. Not only was the material both light and durable, but it was made of monster skin, which was fireproof and resistant to electricity. On top of that, the dark elves had imbued it with powerful endowed thaumaturgical seals that made it much harder than plate armor. Besides his armor, Ryoma was also protected by his own guardian deity.

I think the pain's starting to die down.

The fact that he'd coughed up blood implied that some of his internal organs must have been damaged by the impact, but since he wasn't coughing up any more, Kikoku's powers had already begun healing him. Ryoma also felt a dull pain in his ribs, but that was starting to abate. At the rate it was improving, he figured the pain would completely disappear later today or tomorrow.

That must be its power at play.

Kikoku was a katana crafted by the first master of the Igasaki clan. It was a cursed blade that drained all the prana of any who tried to draw it but were unworthy of being its master. It could use the prana it amassed to exhibit all sorts of supernatural effects too. Ryoma wasn't Kikoku's true master quite yet, but the fact he was able to safely grip the katana implied that it acknowledged him as worthy.

You saved me. Thank you, Ryoma thought, expressing his gratitude to Kikoku.

He tapped the Malfist sisters, who were laying unmoving over his body, reassuringly on the back. Ryoma then got to his feet and wordlessly returned to the tent, resolved to find a way to oppose those who threatened both his life and those of the allies following him.

A full moon hung above, its surface red. The ominous sky seemed to herald the gruesome battle about to take place.

That night, Ryoma attentively listened to the Igasaki scouts give their report. Lione and the others, who were present as well, also listened. Sitting in the corner, away from the table at the center of the tent, were three people, watching over the affair with cloth masks covering their mouths.

“They really had soldiers lying in ambush.” Ryoma clicked his tongue as he moved three white game pieces, symbolizing his enemies, around on the map.

One piece was located a few hours away from his camp. This army, stationed in the center of the Cannat Plains, was about the same size as Ryoma’s army, if not slightly larger. They were clearly positioned there to impede Ryoma’s advance.

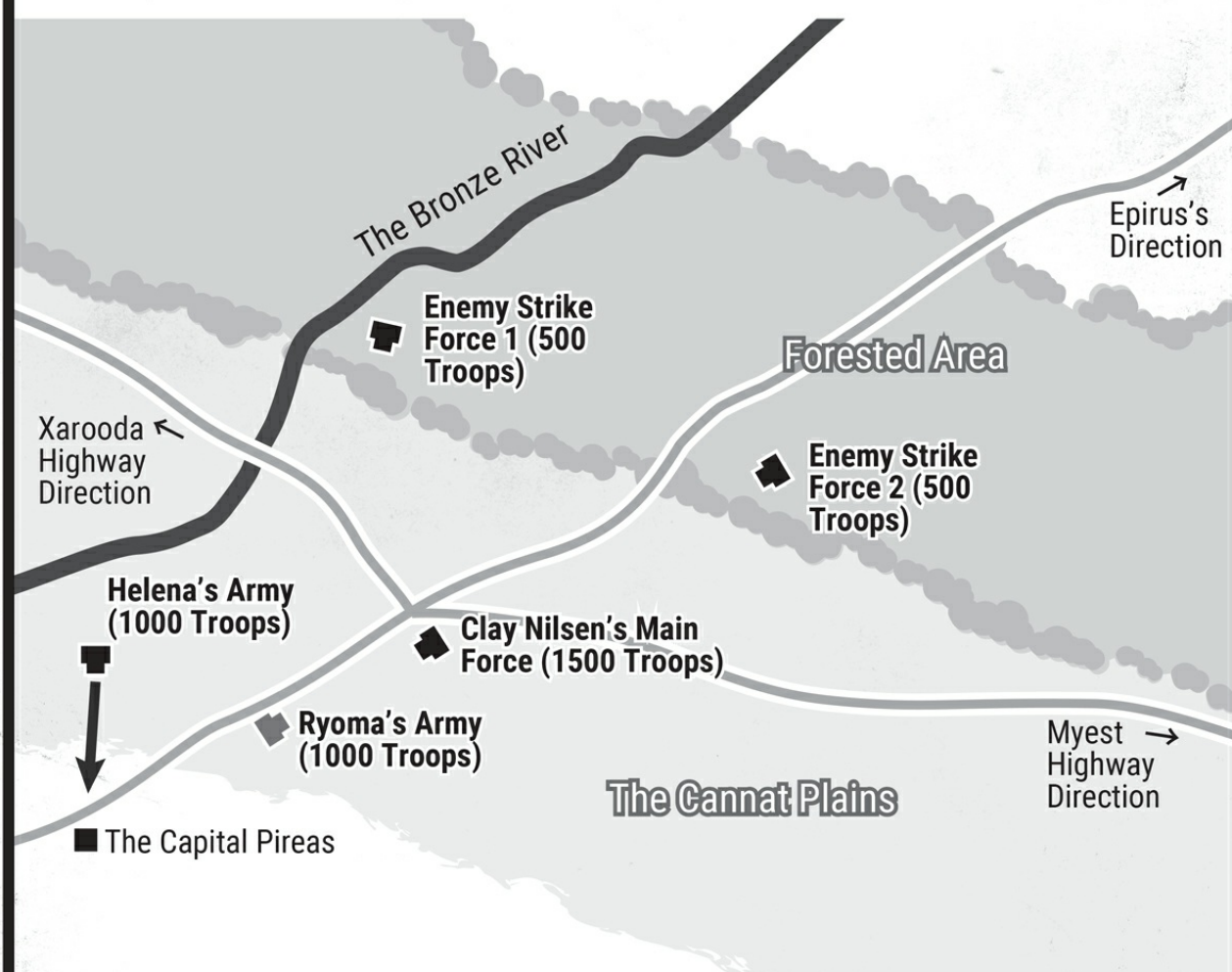
Ryoma had predicted that such an army might be there. The Kingdom of Rhoadseria wasn’t going to ignore his killing Marquis Halcyon and the other members of the House of Lords in Pireas.

This was related to the reasoning Ryoma had given Queen Lupis. The reasons he did it, or whether it was right or wrong, were irrelevant here. Ryoma’s actions had shaken Rhoadseria to its core and struck a blow against its might and influence, so it was to be expected that the kingdom would dispatch soldiers to prevent him from returning to his stronghold in Wortenia.

I figured it’d be difficult for them to organize in time, but I guess with fast horses and smoke signals they were able to send directives to the nobles near the Cannat Plains.

Still, while it was doable, it certainly was easier said than done. Even if the nobles had received orders from the capital to dispatch troops, organizing an army on the spot was impossible. They weren’t dealing with a group of a few dozen bandits either.

The Battle of the Cannat Plains 1



《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》

Forming an army of a thousand soldiers meant they would need to gather a minimal amount of weapons and rations, and that alone took time, to say nothing of calling in the soldiers themselves. Moreover, most nobles didn't have that many knights, so the majority of their forces consisted of commoner conscripts.

With all those factors in mind, expecting the preparations to go smoothly on such short notice was a tall order, and engaging a renowned national hero like Ryoma with an ill-prepared army would be suicide. Upon receiving such an order from the capital, most nobles would have adopted a wait-and-see approach, but that was assuming that the nobles remained calm and acted as calculating and self-serving as ever. People weren't always able to remain collected.

I killed people close to them, after all.

Rhoadseria's nobles were all bound together by a complicated, winding web of blood ties. It could even be said that regardless of if the relation was close, all of Rhoadseria's nobles were related by blood on some level.

Of course, even if they were related, that didn't mean a noble recognized all other nobles as their family. People in Japan could look through their family tree and discover they were related to someone else because their families had wed together centuries ago, but they didn't see those people as family.

That said, the House of Lords' top brass consisted of mostly influential aristocrats, and they were interconnected with many other nobles through marriage. The head of House Halcyon, Marquis Arthur Halcyon, had many siblings, and those alone tied his house by marriage to four other noble houses situated around the Cannat Plains. If one counted his aunts, uncles, and his grandparents' generation, it was hard to tell how many houses in the area had connections with Marquis Halcyon.

It wasn't limited to just House Halcyon either. The Eisenbach and Hamilton counties, as well as other nobles of similar rank, all increased these numbers. If all of them felt spurred to defend themselves against Ryoma, that would inspire them to organize armies faster than usual.

As far as the Igasaki scouts could tell, the central army carried the banners of

multiple noble houses. It was likely that the army stationed in the Cannat Plains was the main enemy force, made up of the nearby house leaders' armies.

Ryoma had expected that an army would be there—it made sense, at least on the surface—but the fact that there were two other forces stationed elsewhere made Ryoma question his suspicions. One was positioned deeper into the Cannat Plains, while the other was hiding in the forested area between the Cannat Plains and the country's northeast. Their presence shook Ryoma's heart.

Just who planned this scenario?

That singular doubt filled his mind. The two smaller detachments were five hundred troops each. Together, they formed a triangle with the forces stationed in the center of the Cannat Plains, the latter being the apex. In total, the enemy army numbered two thousand to twenty-five hundred soldiers. It was nearly twice the size of Ryoma's army.

In addition, two detachments stood at the rear of the battlefield. They looked like forces who hadn't made it in time to join the main force and were relegated to serving as ambush soldiers. They also served as insurance in case Ryoma tried to avoid an encounter with the main army through the center of the plains.

Despite this setup, Ryoma believed the enemy's true intentions lay elsewhere.

They probably split up so they could attack me from two directions.

While the main army held Ryoma's army in check, the ambush detachments would move in to attack him from the flank. At that point, Ryoma would be surrounded and crushed.

That really was dangerous. If I didn't have this information, I'd have gone forward to face the enemy head-on...

He'd been close to walking into the worst possible scenario. Thanks to this warning, he'd avoided mortal danger by the skin of his teeth. He couldn't thank the unexpected guests who'd delivered this precious information enough, but he could express his gratitude after he came up with a countermeasure to this predicament.

Ryoma glanced at the guests standing in the corner of his tent, then back to the game pieces on the map.

Not a bad plan...

This strategy even took Ryoma's temperament and personality into account. He'd have complimented his enemies for their ingenuity if he could. Nonetheless there were still some peculiar aspects to this.

The biggest peculiarity is that implementing this plan would have taken time.

It was impossible that this army had been organized due to an urgent missive from the capital. In other words, someone had predicted Ryoma's actions ahead of time.

And the governors' army is a mixed force, so establishing a chain of command should have been too difficult.

Relying on the surrounding governors to unite and form the numbers necessary was a valid play, but it produced a disjointed force. If all they wanted to do was charge the enemy, that would be enough, but they would be unstable and would fall into disarray as soon as the situation swung against them. Yet the enemy force hidden in the forest area denied that possibility.

All this in mind, I'm starting to doubt that the main force is an unorganized alliance formed by the nearby governors.

Questioning everything would be foolish, but with the information the Igasaki clan had gathered, Ryoma's intuition came up with just one answer.

That means...the main force is made up of elites flying fake banners.

Banners, an important tool used by armies, were meant to signify each unit's affiliation. By examining the banners, commanders could distinguish friend from foe and estimate the battle's situation. This was absolutely necessary for all units on the battlefield, regardless of if they were trained knights or a mercenary band. In a sense, their unit's banner was more important to a knight than their life.

However, no matter how important the banner was, in the end, it was just a flag. A dirty banner could be replaced, and it wasn't unheard of for an army to

fly another unit's banner. It wasn't even that sophisticated or original of a ploy. Any person with some talent in tactics could come up with it. This was precisely why Ryoma found the person who'd planned this scenario so fearsome, though. This basic tactic had been this close to driving Ryoma and his comrades to their ruin.

"The sniping incident, Helena turning her back on me... Someone's trying to trip me up," Ryoma said with a deep sigh. Anger and humiliation brewed in his heart. He'd never felt so defeated since the day he was summoned here.

Not that I was underestimating this world in particular, but still...

Ryoma had never intended to underestimate his foes, not once since the day he'd been summoned here from Japan. Making light of the enemy was foolish, and one would eventually find the rug swept out from under them. Nevertheless, since coming to this world, Ryoma had always been victorious. He'd won too many times, and all those victories might have made Ryoma careless.

"Is Meltina Lecter behind this? Or is it Mikhail Vanash?" Lione asked, breaking the silence.

Others had apparently come to the same conclusion. Those were the same people whom Laura and Sara, who likewise remained quiet, had in mind.

Ryoma shook his head. "It's hard to say right now, but if the army at the center of the plains isn't an allied army formed by the surrounding governors, the only option is that they're knights in service to the kingdom. In which case, I doubt those two are unrelated."

The others all nodded.

"So we should assume we're going up against the kingdom's knights?" Sara muttered.

"Aye," Lione agreed. "That would be the safest assumption we can make."

This was an important distinction to make; whether they were up against the governors' allied army or the kingdom's knights changed which tactics they should employ. It was like preparing against an amateur baseball team, only to find out moments before the match that they were actually professional

baseball players. Realizing they were going up against someone much stronger than expected would greatly shake their spirits too.

This was also a surprise attack, in a sense. To begin with, they wouldn't have been able to exhibit their full strength against an unexpected enemy, but if they knew what they were facing ahead of time, things were different.

"So, Chief, what are you gonna have us do?" Robert asked provocatively. "If you want to sic Signus and me on the enemy, we'll be glad to tear through their ranks. I won't lie, we've been itching for a chance to stretch our legs and snap some necks." He must have been very confident in his and Signus's might, because it was apparently a serious offer.

In truth, the two of them hadn't had much work to speak of recently. The most they'd done was handling the security around Count Salzberg's estate a few days ago, and that job was much more dull than fighting on the front lines. And even then, Ryoma and the Igasaki ninjas had been the ones to actually dispose of the attackers in that case. For all Robert was concerned, all they'd done was take a leisurely walk on the estate's lawn.

All in all, warriors like Robert needed the battlefield. It was their workplace—the place where they belonged—so Robert relished this tense situation. If Ryoma only gave the word, he'd charge headlong into the enemy even if he was all alone.

Signus, of course, couldn't help but be disturbed that his name had been brought up without his permission.

"Bloody hell, Robert, what's wrong with you! We're in the middle of a war council here!"

Signus hit him with common sense, but Robert didn't seem the slightest bit bothered. He unapologetically picked his ear with his pinky. After digging in it for a second, he took his finger out, showed Signus the loot he'd found, and punctuated it by blowing it at him.

"What's wrong, Signus? You getting cold feet?"

Signus tolerated his best friend's taunting words, although his fist was quivering. If they hadn't been in the presence of their lord, Signus would have

sunk his clenched fist into Robert's face.

Ryoma laughed at their exchange. He wasn't trying to stop them, nor was he going to blame them for their behavior. Both Robert, with his cheeky courage, and Signus, with his calm, collected demeanor, were important blades in his arsenal. When all was said and done, swords were for taking human life, and weapons only had meaning when they saw use.

They're definitely swords that choose their master.

Knowing this, Ryoma decided to grant Robert's wish.

"You know what? Yeah. I'll take you up on that offer. It'll be a risky gamble for sure, but I'll bet on you, Robert. You too, Signus. I want you to pick 150 knights each from your respective baronies and tear into the enemy's ranks."

Robert hadn't expected Ryoma to agree, and he glanced at Signus, who sat beside him. Robert then laughed out loud. He realized the intent behind Ryoma's words, and rather than surprise or confusion, his expression was full of joy.

"You seeing this, Signus?! This is the greatness of the master we serve and respect! Aaah, for how young you are, you do understand how I think."

Signus, who was also asked to go, remained calm. "Are you telling us to break through the central army's lines then, Chief?"

It made sense that Ryoma would ask them to do just that, but Signus sensed something else in Ryoma's words.

Ryoma nodded and placed three black game pieces over the central army's position on the map. Two of the game pieces were cavalry, and the remaining one was infantry. Ryoma then began moving the pieces over the map. Everyone remained silent. They were all considering whether the strategy Ryoma was proposing was possible.

"I see," Lione said, her voice full of amazement and approval. "You always come up with the most interesting strategies, boy."

Everyone seemed to feel the same way, including Robert and Signus, who were the core of this tactic.

Ryoma nodded. “Then, everyone, prepare to move out tomorrow.”

Lione and the others left the tent one by one to organize the units. The last one to leave was Sakuya, who glanced at Ryoma. Ryoma nodded briefly at her, to which she looked away and left the tent quickly.

“Now then,” Ryoma said, looking around the tent.

“Master Ryoma, should we leave too?” asked Laura, who was still standing behind Ryoma.

Ryoma shook his head.

Might be better to have Laura and Sara here.

Honestly, Ryoma had no idea how to approach this situation, and he couldn't imagine which way things might go. He knew one thing for sure, though; whichever way it went, it was bound to have repercussions for the Mikoshiba barony's future. If so, Ryoma wanted the twins, who'd been his companions for as long as he'd been in this world, to listen in on this. They might not have been connected to him by blood, but they were family.

Sensing Ryoma's feelings on the matter, the twins took a step back. The three people waiting in the tent's corner saw this as a signal to step forward and approach Ryoma. The elderly man leading the trio took another step forward.

Ryoma knew his face very well, but at the same time, this man couldn't possibly be here.

“I looked time and again, but it still hasn't sunk in.” Ryoma sighed. “Really, what are you doing here, grandpa?”

The man smiling at him shouldn't have been here.

I can't believe I've lived to see him again.

When the O'ltromea Empire's court thaumaturgist, Gaius Valkland, summoned him to this world, Ryoma had made peace with the fact that he would never see his grandfather's face again, so Ryoma's mind was torn between joy and confusion. Even he, with his nerves of steel, struggled to keep himself composed at this moment.

Having anticipated his grandson's reaction, Koichiro Mikoshiba nodded. “It's

been too long, my grandchild.”

His first words to Ryoma were all too brief.



The following day, at noon...

As the sun shone down upon the land, Ryoma engaged the enemy army at the heart of the Cannat Plains. They moved in an arrowhead formation, with Lione’s heavy infantry leading the charge and Ryoma’s cavalry bringing up the rear. As the name implied, the formation was in the shape of an arrow. Deployed all around them were Igasaki warrior ninjas, who’d set up a barrier and defensive perimeter meant to shield Ryoma’s army from enemy scouts and ambush units.

The enemy army, by contrast, set up an orthodox defensive perimeter, with impediments stationed to form a wall meant to stop horses and heavy infantry. For how simple it was, the formation was effective and as sturdy as iron.

Ryoma had chosen an arrowhead formation, which prioritized offense, while the enemy commander had picked a defensive formation. Together, the two armies were like a spear hurtling toward a stout shield.

Two hours had passed since the battle started. Lione was gradually beginning to pressure the enemy army. Typically, heavy infantry weren’t suited for an arrowhead formation because, although it was an offensive formation that crushed enemies in a frontal assault, it was weak to attacks from the flank. The heavy infantry also lacked the mobility required to break through the enemy’s ranks.

Despite this, Lione’s skillful command was able to turn those flaws into an advantage. By arranging the heavy infantry all across their formation, she prioritized defensive power rather than mobility and force, which allowed her to gradually press forward and overpower the enemy.

Her advance struck fear into the enemy army; they all felt a noose slowly tightening around their necks.

We broke through the first and second defensive lines, but there’s still a few more before we reach the enemy camp, Lione thought.

Although the battle was going in their favor, Lione wasn't pleased with the situation.

"It's like the boy predicted," Lione whispered as she led the vanguard. "It would've been ideal if we could've broken through to the enemy's front quickly, but it's not gonna be that easy."

In terms of equipment, Lione's infantry unit had much better gear than the enemy. True, Ryoma's army was at a numerical disadvantage, and the enemy encampment was fortified to protect against cavalry, but the enemy was stationed in a provisional camp with impromptu fortifications. They couldn't easily overturn the advantage that the equipment gave Ryoma's army.

Be that as it may, the enemy soldiers fought with such ferocity that the difference in gear was hardly felt. It was proof that they were skilled and motivated. Their performance made it hard to believe that they were just a cobbled-together alliance of governor armies with no real chain of command.

From the feel of things, it really is likely they're flyin' fake banners. I swear, knights pullin' the same kind of tricks mercenaries would... Chivalry ain't worth a damn anymore, is it?

Lione glanced at the multiple banners and the family crests drawn on them.

Which means they're plannin' on us cuttin' into the enemy's back lines. They're probably lettin' us hollow out their formation to buy time for the other two units to swoop in on us.

Lione's heavy infantry was advancing slowly but surely, and under the pressure of their charge, the enemy formation was spreading out horizontally. It was starting to take the shape of a crescent arc.

Not a bad formation...

Normally, this would've been the time to send in Ryoma's cavalry unit to break through the enemy lines. There was the possibility of a trap, but the army Ryoma had nurtured was strong enough to handle it. Their chances of winning were good enough to warrant gambling on a charge. If nothing else, as leader of the Crimson Lions, Lione wouldn't let this golden chance slip her by.

Be that as it may, Lione didn't act. There was a good chance it would work,

yes, but she wasn't absolutely sure. Even if she did emerge from this engagement victorious, her forces would take considerable losses. Most of all, Lione wasn't the captain of a mercenary group anymore; she was now a knight and senior commander of the Mikoshiba barony's forces.

No need to hurry. We just need to listen to what the boy says and keep things steady.

Lione decided to let time march by and minimize her soldiers' losses—at least, she did, until she heard the beast howl...



At around the same time that thought crossed Lione's mind, Clay Nilsen, the commander of the enemy army, silently listened to the countless reports coming in from the runners. Once he'd heard them all, he rapidly started giving orders.

"I see. So unit thirteen has retreated to the back. Then order their captain to return to the battlefield and secure the center of the formation once they're done replacing their injured soldiers."

Clay was a large man in his fifties, with a receding hairline but a magnificent beard. He stood at an imposing 190 centimeters, and his facial features were the very image of terror. He'd lost his right ear years ago in battle, and his personal armor was covered in countless scratches. At a glance, it was obvious that he was the type of knight who'd charge into the enemy's lines; he wasn't one to bark commands from the safety of the camp.

Contrary to appearances, however, Clay stuck to his role as commander without complaint. He wasn't doing it begrudgingly either; his presence in the back of the army, calmly responding to reports, soothed the hearts of those around him. He was as firm and imposing as a mountain.

"It seems they're pushing back a little. As I was told, the man we're up against is something special," Clay murmured as he moved game pieces on the map before him.

"Yes. We anticipated that the enemy army would attempt to break through the center, but we never expected them to use heavy infantry at the front," his

lieutenant said, frustrated.

Everyone present felt the same frustration, but Clay, trying to assuage his lieutenant, said, “Don’t let it trouble you. Unforeseen developments are par for the course. Even though they are pushing against us a little, it’s nothing we didn’t expect.”

Clay looked at the two game pieces on the map, which were placed on the forested area spanning above their headquarters.

“And? Any word from the other units?” Clay asked. It was clear they hadn’t made it yet, but this wasn’t what Clay was asking.

“No, sir. We’ve sent runners to give them frequent updates on the situation, but nothing yet.”

Clay had expected that response. “I see. Keep your wits about you. Lady Meltina and Sir Mikhail came up with this plan, so we cannot afford a single mistake.”

After giving his lieutenant a nod, Clay crossed his thick arms in front of him and closed his eyes. This was a quirk of his, one he’d developed over many years on the battlefield. Although he seemed calm and composed, a human heart did beat in Clay, and he couldn’t completely contain his emotions. What’s more, the tactic they’d chosen this time split their forces to attack from two fronts and to encircle and wipe out the enemy. It was a daring strategy, one that could decide whether they won or lost in one fell swoop.

Once surrounded, not even a national hero like Ryoma Mikoshiba, the so-called Devil of Heraklion, would be able to win. That was assuming the plan worked, though. Such daring strategies were incredibly effective if they succeeded, but if they failed, they’d throw whoever tried them into a precarious situation.

Clay was betting everything on this risky gamble, which was why he was listening to his heart.

Am I worrying too much? No. If we just wait a while longer, we’ll get the information we need.

Since communication methods were limited in this world, relaying

information to and from other units was difficult. That was especially true when an allied army was marching their way. In order for their allies to strike the Mikoshiba army from the flank, they'd have to take major detours.

With that in mind, sending runners was tricky. Since their allies were on the move, the runners had no way of tracking where they were, meaning it was a matter of luck whether they actually found the allied units and delivered their messages. At worst, the runners could keep wandering the Cannat Plains in search of the allied forces even hours after the battle ended.

Knowing this, Clay couldn't shake the ominous premonition that gripped his heart, but the die had already been cast. Although he had a bad feeling, there was no stopping the plan now. His only recourse was to wait for the time to come.

With no other option, Clay ordered, "Carry on as is. Let them push into our formation bit by bit and wait for the right time!"

Unfortunately, his decision would become a painful mistake.



The sun began sinking from the roof of the sky into the mountains spanning the Xaroodian border. The battle was finally approaching its climax. Robert Bertrand glared at the enemy army standing before him, swinging his long-handled war axe overhead.

At his back were his brothers-in-arms, who'd fought at his side for many years. Their numbers weren't large, a mere 150 or so knights, but they were all brave, seasoned warriors. When they attacked the enemy detachment earlier, they'd stolen the enemy's Rhoadserian banners, which they then used to approach the enemy's main force as "allies."

Seriously, for how young he is, the chief is sharp. Using the same tactic he almost fell for to dupe the enemy...

What was about to happen next was a pincer maneuver that would end in a massacre—except the roles would be reversed. Ryoma's army would be the attacker, while Clay Nilsen's army would be the victims.

Letting victory slip away after they cast away their pride as knights... I feel bad

for them, even if they are my enemies, but I guess that's on them for siding against the chief.

The Igasaki clan's spies had already informed Robert that Signus's unit was prepared to strike, so there was no need for Robert to hold back. All that remained was to finish the job.

"Hold up our banners!" Robert ordered.

His comrades lowered all the banners they were holding, and in their place, they raised banners with the Mikoshiba barony's emblem on them—a silver and gold two-headed snake coiled around a sword.

"Chaaaaarge!" Robert yelled, swinging his war axe down with vigor.

He stirred his horse into a gallop and began his charge into the exposed rear of the enemy formation. He was like a catastrophe in human form, and that catastrophe was about to reap the lives of enemy soldiers who'd believed just moments ago that he was an ally.

"Go, go, go! Where's the enemy commander?! Come on out, you coward!"

Shouts roared in every direction. Blood spurted and danced in the wind, scattering over the ground like flower petals. Robert's axe howled as it cut through the air, and each time it did, screams filled the battlefield.

On the other side of the enemy army, Robert could hear cheers rising.

"Looks like Signus finally got going too!"

Robert continued his charge, imagining the way Signus had likely swung his favored weapon, his iron staff, in all directions. He was determined not to let his brother-in-arms outshine him. He knew this was his duty to his new lord.



After Robert's charge, Lione handled the front lines, allowing Ryoma and his cavalry unit to break the enemy's ranks. Following that, Signus launched an attack on the enemy headquarters, claiming the head of Clay Nilsen.

So ended the battle of the Cannat Plains. However, it was only the prelude for the next battle.

Several days later, upon learning of her army's defeat, Lupis Rhoadserians officially branded Ryoma Mikoshiba as a traitor against the kingdom. She also ordered that the entire kingdom form a subjugation army and march on the Wortenia Peninsula.

Epilogue

The glass window pane rattled as the wind and rain beat it. Today was one of the few days in the year when a great downpour washed over the land.

The curtains were closed, so the room was quite dim despite it being the middle of the day. Normally, one would light a candle or a lamp, but the room's owner didn't mind the gloom. After all, light would be of little use to him since he'd spent many years lying in bed.

The sound of intense coughing filled the room. Feeling another seizure overtake him, Akimitsu Kuze opened his eyes. He groped at his bedside, picked up a cloth, and pressed it to his lips. The taste of rust flooded his mouth.

The seizures are getting more frequent, but I can't afford to die just yet.

That thought kept Kuze's soul tethered to his fatally ill flesh.

Once the coughing died down, Kuze slowly got to his feet and threw the cloth he used to clean his mouth into a wastebasket at the foot of his bed. He then reached for a pitcher full of water on the bedside table, so as to wash the taste of blood off his tongue.

It was then that someone who shouldn't have been in the room spoke.

"I see you're not in the best of health today, Mr. Kuze."

Standing in the corner was a man. Just when had he walked into the room? It was dim, so visibility was poor, and the voice's owner was five to six meters away from Kuze. Nevertheless, he didn't blame this insolent figure for his uninvited intrusion. Instead, he calmly greeted the suspicious man.

"I suppose I just showed you something unpleasant," Kuze said. "My apologies. I'm usually bedridden, so I rarely light the lamps. I'll light them now. Give me a moment."

Kuze raised his body and made to get out of bed, intent on lighting a lamp. Going to such lengths didn't fit a man like Kuze—one of the leaders of the

powerful Organization that hid in the shadows of this continent. Kuze didn't seem to mind, but thankfully, the intruder wasn't cruel enough to let an elderly, infirm man go to such trouble.

"Please, stay put. I'll light them," the man said. He walked to the shelf on the wall, took a bottle of oil and a flint, and used them to light the lamp on the table.

Kuze, who was sitting on his bed, apologized. "I'm sorry for troubling you, Lord Sudou."

Akitake Sudou responded to Kuze's apology with his usual pleasant smile. He then picked up the pitcher and the glass from the bedside table.

"Oh, don't let that bother you. Our relationship is one of give-and-take, after all," Sudou said, pouring water into the glass and presenting it to Kuze. "Here you are. Drink. You were going to take your medicine, yes?"

"Yes, thank you. Then if you'll excuse me..."

At Sudou's prodding, Kuze put a medicine capsule he'd prepared ahead of time into his mouth and washed it down with the water. He then took a deep breath and apologized earnestly again.

"My apologies for not being able to properly greet you."

Kuze was acting as if he were a subordinate bowing his head to his superior. Sudou didn't seem to find this at all unusual, because he took a chair by the wall without permission and placed it next to Kuze's bed.

"Now then," Sudou said, sitting on the chair. "May I ask why you called me here? While I can certainly use the ley lines to travel near instantaneously in and out of Rhoadseria, I am getting along in years, so I can't use that technique so frequently."

Sudou lightly tapped his own shoulders. Kuze replied with a sarcastic smile.

The ley lines were flows of energy circulating through Rearth's land, not unlike blood vessels. Sudou could assimilate with the ley lines, which allowed him to travel vast distances in the blink of an eye. No normal verbal thaumaturgist could do that.

Needless to say, this was a hidden art that not everyone could invoke. If a lesser man were to try this technique, they would meet but one fate: they would be washed away by the vast amounts of energy flowing through the ley lines, which would then tear their mind and body to shreds.

In a world where the only methods of travel were by foot or on horseback, Sudou's access to these ley lines gave him an overwhelming advantage. That was why he was able to work for the Organization while also commanding an intelligence unit for the O'ltromea Empire.

He's the same as ever. I thought my urgent summons might have annoyed him, but it seems his mood isn't that bad—for now.

Kuze was one of the Organization's leaders and was ranked among its top three most accomplished members. Even so, he was careful with how he interacted with Sudou, who was currently regarding Kuze with a pleasant grin.

Akitake Sudou was a powerful man. He was so exceptional that even if one searched this entire world over, they would be hard-pressed to find a man who could match him.

An ascendant—a monster who has broken through the boundaries of being human.

The human body contained seven chakras. Being able to activate the seventh chakra—the Sahasrara Chakra, which was also known as the crown chakra—allowed a human to rise above the boundaries of their race. Those who could do that were known as transcendents. But Akitake Sudou had reached the level even beyond that of a transcendent, and he was a very fickle man.

Kuze knew from many years of acquaintance that just a single verbal slipup was all it took to spoil Sudou's mood, so Kuze replied honestly. "I'm sorry. But it is absolutely necessary that we speak in person."

"Oh, you needed to speak to me? Very well, then," Sudou said, still smiling. "Since I took the time to come here, I suppose I'll answer your questions to the best of my ability."

Sudou's attitude told Kuze all he needed to know.

He's already predicted what I'm going to ask. In that case...

This wasn't good news for Kuze, but that didn't change what he had to do. Either way, he needed to hear the truth from Sudou's lips.

"Then let me ask, Lord Sudou, why are you conspiring against Koichiro's grandson? If possible, I'd like to hear what your intentions are for him."

That was the one question Kuze needed an answer to.

*Convincing Helena Steiner to turn against him, having a sniper shoot him...
Why is he so obsessed with Ryoma Mikoshiba?*

That doubt bound Kuze's heart like a chain. The Organization operated behind the scenes, so it couldn't openly support Ryoma, but it could have used the guild as an intermediary to send Organization members to Rhoadseria as mercenaries and adventurers to help him. Or it could have used one of the firms under its umbrella to offer him financial support. Of course, Ryoma had proved to be talented enough to grow stronger even without the Organization's support.

So this raises the question: what is Sudou doing?

No one within the Organization was above Kuze. The only ones who matched his authority were the other Elders, who equaled him in rank. Still, even if another elder had given those orders, Kuze had enough influence to countermand them.

Akitake Sudou was above his influence, yet Kuze asked this while realizing he might be buying Sudou's ire. He also knew that depending on what Sudou said, he could very well be forfeiting his life for asking that question.

That's all I can do for a sworn friend's grandchild...

It was this emotion that spurred Kuze to act. Sudou, however, gave Kuze a teasing smile and replied with an answer that Kuze couldn't have ever anticipated.



After his talk with Sudou, Kuze turned off the lamp and sank back into his bed, but even with his eyes closed and his body wrapped in the bedsheets, Kuze's mind refused to rest.

“For a better tomorrow, eh?”

This idea had been passed down in the Organization uninterrupted ever since its conception. It was a wish made centuries ago, when a single man who’d been summoned to this hellish world banded together with his comrades and fellow otherworlders.

That was Sudou’s answer. On the surface, his words sounded like an oath reaffirming his allegiance to the Organization. Any Organization member unaware of Sudou’s true nature and his past misdeeds would be deeply impressed with Sudou for saying that, but Kuze knew who Sudou really was, and he couldn’t accept Sudou’s answer at face value.

This includes all the subterfuge Sudou has conducted in Rhoadseria as of late too.

Indeed, Sudou likely wasn’t lying, and he’d done these things in the Organization’s name, but the fact that he didn’t seem to care if his plans succeeded or failed changed everything considerably. With that insight, Kuze was able to guess at Sudou’s actual intentions.

That man... He relishes in the danger.

That thought lingered in Kuze’s mind. The way Sudou’s eyes seemed to occasionally glint with madness made Kuze freeze in fear.

But what can I do to stop him?

Kuze himself was a transcendent, capable of activating the Sahasrara Chakra. He still drew breath, despite the debilitating illness, thanks to the vast amounts of prana circulating through his body. But what could Kuze do to stop Sudou in his current state? He might be able to fight while consuming his vast prana reserves, but that would only last about ten seconds and that would be it. Ten seconds of combat would deplete his prana, at which point Kuze would die. But this wasn’t the only reason Kuze couldn’t stop Sudou.

Me, stop him? No. I can’t do that. His actions are always meant to further the Organization and its interests. I know that...

Kuze did respect Akitake Sudou, and he was loyal to the older man, but only because Sudou was the founder and the true ruler of the Organization. Kuze felt

that Sudou's scheming and conspiring was questionable at times, but he would never consider opposing Sudou. If nothing else, Kuze would continue to respect Sudou, at least until the day his actions posed a threat to the Organization. Nonetheless, Kuze realized that even if he did resist, it would be meaningless.

Koichiro... How I wish I could see you. To meet you and tell you everything. Until that happens, I cannot afford to die.

The friend Kuze once lost to fate's whimsy had returned to this world, but with the way things were now, he couldn't so much as speak to him freely.

Kuze decided to once again drift away into sleep—to dream of the day when he could entrust his wish with another. Kuze was just a man, though, and he had no way of knowing that on that day, an army of several thousand men, carrying a banner with the emblem of scales, arrived at the city of Galatia, near Rhoadseria's southern border. He had no way of knowing that a new war was on the verge of starting.

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

This volume marks the end of Ryoma's long-running feud with the House of Lords. Meltina's dark awakening, as well as Sudou's offer to Helena, also stands out. Volume 17 marks these exciting developments, but in addition to that, I've included a first for the series—a map of the battlefield detailing the different armies' positions. With this, it should be easier for readers to imagine the battles.

Of course, this volume only detailed who won, but in the next volume, I'll use it to explain the tactics and the behind-the-scenes details of the battle. It'll be something like unveiling a mystery, so those curious about it should look forward to volume 18.

With that said, please continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*.









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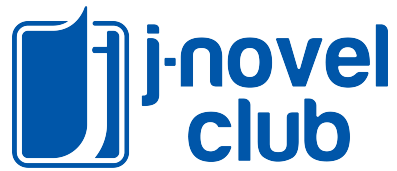
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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 17

by Ryota Hori

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